Puissance

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Puissance

by HigherMagic

Summary

The Lecter stables have just acquired a new horse: an ill-tempered stallion named 'Red'. Hannibal makes him Will's responsibility, confident that Will can make him into a champion.

Notes

No excuses. No self-control. Have a Hannigram Equestrian AU! It's T for now but it'll become E at some point.

"Puissance" is a special brand of show-jumping where horses are made to do a jumping course of large obstacles, I believe the record is 7ft something right now. The videos are absolutely amazing, I recommend checking them out!

Chapter 1

The day is warm, winter finally submitting to the undeniable press of spring, and Will is soaked in sweat as he finishes mucking the last stall of the day. He sighs, running his hands through his hair, and sets the stall fork against the wall, leaning at an angle. He hears a sharp wolf-whistle behind him, and turns around, glaring half-heartedly when he sees Bev leaning against the second to last stall, which is currently empty. She's leaning like the fork, her arms folded, one knee bent so her toe rests on the outside of her other foot, and gives his bare chest an appreciative once-over.

He rolls his eyes at her, grabs his shirt from where he'd slung it over the stall door, and shrugs it on, wincing when it immediately sticks to the sweat on his skin. He rucks his fingers through his hair again and eyes her when she keeps staring.

"I'm gonna start charging you if you're expecting a show."

Her eyes brighten with laughter, and she smirks at him. "The boss wants to see you," she says. Will sighs, and nods, and she turns and leaves, out of the open stable doors and towards one of the paddocks. On the other side of the aisle, there is a single large stall where the pride and joy of Lecter Stables resides – it's Mischa Lecter's horse, a bay mare named Pergalė with a fierce temper for anyone except, it seems, Will and Mischa, and her brother Hannibal – the stable owner, and Will's boss.

The Lecters are the kind of family that ooze money and refinement, the kind where it wouldn't surprise Will to learn they had been born onto diamond sheets and placed in gold bassinets. They have their hands in all things equestrian; racing, three-day-eventing, Olympic dressage. Will was hired on after a glowing referral from Bev, who is in charge of the day to day operations of the stable. His official title, he thinks, is stable-hand, though Bev likes to call him the stable boy more often than not, with one of those familiar half-smirks that makes Will roll his eyes at her.

He sighs again, flexing his shoulders as Mischa's mare eyes him from behind her stall bars. "What do you think he wants?" he asks her, and she snorts at him in reply, shaking out her mane. He rolls his eyes. "Very helpful. Thanks."

She snorts again.

It's not that Will doesn't like Hannibal – in truth he doesn't really feel one way or another about him. The man is so seldom here, and when he is here he seems more content with a brief walk around with his sister, making sure nothing is obviously on fire or in disorder, before he disappears into the building that serves as an office and part of their summer mansion. Will has been inside it exactly once, and the place was so clean, himself so *not*, that it makes his skin crawl.

He turns on the hose coiled by the fork, wets his hands with the cold water and sprays it over his hair to try and get rid of some of the sweat and dust clinging to him. The water bites into

his warm neck and wrists, and he shivers, rubbing his hands through his hair and pushing it back from his face, and ducks out of the stable.

He stops, immediately, when he sees Hannibal. He looks the same as he normally does, dressed in one of those suits that are probably worth Will's (admittedly, generous) salary twice over. He's standing with Bev on one side, a woman Will recognizes only in passing on the other, staring out to the small corral where there stands a single horse.

The animal is a giant. Will thinks he might be mostly thoroughbred, but there's hints of warm-blooded stock in him too, his mane thick and short-cropped, his tail long and the color of flaxseed. He is not quite brown – redder, like a roan. And much taller than other thoroughbreds Will has seen, with sturdier legs and a larger muzzle. He is running around the edges of the corral, shrieking in that way stallions do, tossing his head and shoving his shoulders against the bars to test the strength of them.

Bev turns as Will approaches, clearing his throat to get her attention, and she grins at him. Hannibal turns, as well, and gives Will a once-over not appreciative, more assessing, the same way he looks at his horses. His lips purse at Will's state of down-dress and sweat, and Will winces, ducks his head and puts his hands in the back pockets of his jeans.

"You wanted to see me, Sir?" he asks.

Hannibal nods. "Will, allow me to introduce Miss Margot Verger," he says, and the second woman straightens, and turns. She is younger than Will expected, younger than most of the people who house their horses here – and those are many; every horse owner wants to train their animal at the prestigious Lecter stable grounds.

She is pale, with a sharp chin and big, green eyes, her hair a little more brown than red and highlighted with honey. Will nods to her, and resists the urge to offer his hand because he stinks and he's dirty and Hannibal's friends are not the kind of people to shake hands with the help.

He recognizes the name, in the same way people know the names of celebrities – she's not famous in that way, but her family owns the meat-packing plant on the other side of Baltimore, and he's seen her around the stables before. So he gives her a polite nod and a smile, before he lowers his eyes to Hannibal's shoes.

"Nice to meet you."

"And you," she replies, soft and kind. Behind them, one of the other hands – a kid named Jesse – calls for Bev, and she parts from them with an apologetic nod, hurrying over to him, and they disappear behind the stables.

They stand in another moment of silence, and Will feels jittery and on-edge. The new stallion's cries are getting to him. Horses, he has found, are not unlike the dogs he trains and keeps in his spare time. They are larger, of course, but they can be trained. Tamed. Clearly Hannibal and Margot are looking upon something wild.

"Miss Verger has brought us a new acquisition for the stable," Hannibal tells him, finally severing the line of Will's nerves keeping him tense. Will nods, and puts his eyes on the horse, watches him bluster and huff, pawing at the gate of the corral, snorting heavily. He will start to make the geldings and mares nervous, if he keeps up like that. "As you can see, he's quite…energetic."

Will huffs, and smiles. "That's one way to put it."

"I have no doubt you'll be able to make a fine mount of him, Hannibal," Margot says, with a soft familiarity and a hand on Hannibal's arm. She smiles at him, and he returns it, as courteous as Will has always seen him. "My brother was very insistent on having him. He's from Secretariat's line."

"Do you intend to race him?" Will asks, stepping up to them and taking his place on Hannibal's other side, leaning on the fence that separates the stable walkway, from the row of grass, then the corral.

Hannibal's brows lift. "I was thinking, at first, something a little more…closed-in," he says, and Will looks at him, tilts his head. Hannibal gives him a smile almost playful. "I don't know any jockey that would be comfortable running a beast like that on a track. Not as he is now."

"Of course not, now," Will replies. Hannibal blinks at him, his lips pursing, and Will flushes, sets his heel against the bottom-most slat of the fence, and rests his forearms on the top, staring out at the stallion again. "What, then? Eventing?"

Hannibal and Margot share a look. "Perhaps."

Will presses his lips together, looks towards the stallion again. He has not tired for a second – clearly an animal of good stamina. He'd be good in cross-country, with his size and going power. Dressage, though, Will isn't sure they could ever get him to the right level of poise.

"I was thinking puissance," Margot says.

Will blinks at her, his brows rising. "Puissance," he repeats, and then looks back to the horse. Well, he certainly has the height for it, but a puissance course requires a lot of strength, and fearlessness, both in horse and rider. And trust, as well as tight control to be able to rein in an animal's instinct to sprint, when to release for the high jumps, when to give it your all.

Will startles as Margot's phone starts to ring, and she fishes it out of the pocket of her jacket, gives them an apologetic smile, and answers, turning and walking a little away so she might speak in private. Hannibal and Will watch her go, and then Hannibal turns back to Will. His head tilts, expectantly, and Will doesn't know what he's supposed to say.

He flushes under Hannibal's sharp gaze, and looks back out to the horse, winces as the stallion whinnies, high and shrill, and bucks fiercely into the center of the small ring.

"We need to let him run," he says.

Hannibal hums, his fingers curling around the topmost part of the fence. "What do you think?" he asks. "Of training him for puissance?"

"It's ambitious, but I think that's why Miss Verger brought him here," Will replies, and huffs. "You have a reputation for turning out champions."

Hannibal's lips twitch in a prideful smile. "I'm glad you think so," he says, and straightens. "Then it's decided. You start tomorrow."

Will blinks at him, his eyes widening. "…What?"

"How long have you worked for me, Will? Almost five years now. I have seen how you work with the horses – they all trust and are comfortable around you. Even Pergalė trusts you, which is a rare thing." Will nods; he knows this. "I'd like you to make him your personal project."

Will can only stare, and stare some more, until Hannibal's gaze locks with his, and he ducks his head, flustered. The idea that he would be given any kind of training job is one Hell of a promotion, especially since Hannibal's current trainer, Francis, already has such a stellar reputation. He's excited, too – his heart jumps behind his ribs, because he knows how much of a gesture this is; Hannibal's decision to allow him personal and sole station of taking care of a high-profile client's horse is a big deal.

"I don't know how to train a horse," he says, quietly, wincing.

"Nonsense. Beverly has told me many times how capable you are with your dogs. I'm sure you and he can come to some agreement." He nods to the horse, and smiles, and Will can't help smiling as well. "Make use of any of the facilities you need. I'm sure we can expect great things from you."

Will nods, swallowing harshly, and looks at the stallion again. He has calmed somewhat, blowing out huge breaths through his flared nostrils, trotting around and around the corral. "What's his name?"

Margot ends her call, and returns to them. "Ah! Miss Verger, just in time. Will has graciously agreed to train your animal. What is his name?"

She smiles. "I'm glad to hear it! And his official name is 'Red Morning Star', but I've just been calling him Red."

Red. A fitting name. Passion, and power, and with the apt nod to Lucifer himself. Will smiles.

"Come, it is almost dinner time, and Will has much to do. We mustn't keep him too long," Hannibal says, and offers his arm. Margot takes it, sliding her hand into the crook of his elbow, and they leave Will with one last set of nods and smiles. Will watches them go, before he turns his attention back to the stallion.

He ducks between the slats of the fence, crosses the stretch of green, and approaches the horse. Red snorts at him, shying back, rearing up and giving a shrill neigh, his hears flat against his head, his sides caked with sweat.

Will huffs, and rolls his eyes. "Go on then," he murmurs. "Tire yourself out, you big brute."

Red's eyes roll as well, showing white, and he whinnies and kicks at the corral next to where Will is standing. Will knows this behavior in dogs well enough – they will growl, and raise their hackles, meaning to assert themselves to see if Will bends and accepts their dominance. But Will is the alpha of his pack at home, and he has yet to meet a horse that cowed him in any measure.

"Yeah, yeah, get it all out," he says, and remains where he is as Red blusters and paws at the ground, digging up the dirt with one large black hoof. Will smiles, and leans in, resting his folded arms on the metal bars of the corral. He grins, when Red snorts, and tosses his head, turning away. "We'll make a champion of you yet."

Chapter 2

Red runs himself to a trembling standstill around eight in the evening. Will has watched for the whole time, measuring the length of his strides, the tremor of his muscles, the way his head will toss when he's about to buck. He doesn't lower his head to do that, like most horses, but kicks out sharply, and when he rears up Will has watched him almost fall on his ass because he pushed up too far.

He definitely has power, and it's all in his hindquarters; he'll make a good jumper. Will just has to figure out how to get a dialogue started. With his dogs, he offers a soothing voice, treats, a warm bed and good grooming, but Red is in perfect physical condition. He doesn't need any tending to that Will can see – his hooves are shiny and cleaned-out, his shoes look new, his shoulders and haunches bulge with muscle, his gut is swollen naturally outwards, but not so much to imply he's being overfed. His mane is a little longer than Will thinks he'll keep it for showing, a pale color like old honey. His coat is – well, was – a soft russet color, but now it's so dark with sweat it looks like old rust. He's soaked with sweat behind his stomach, on his neck, and his nostrils are flared very wide as he pants and paces around the corral.

Finally, he pulls up to a sharp halt, and Will tilts his head. Red's ears flick towards him, he breathes out, swings his head down like a human might when trying to crack their necks. Will's brow rises.

"You done?" he asks. He's tired – his workday starts at dawn and he went straight from cleaning the stalls to watching Red, well past the time Beverly, Jesse, and the other stable hands went home. Hannibal and Margot are still in the house, he thinks.

His attention is caught by the revving of an engine, and a familiar pastel-blue Mini convertible comes up the gravel path, halting at the steps leading up to the side of the house. Will grins widely, knowing this car, and the engine turns off. From the car emerges possibly the tiniest woman Will knows – Mischa Lecter, unlike her brother, is perhaps a hair over five-foot-three, with long dirty blonde hair she keeps in a perma-braid. She's paler than Hannibal, and much more delicate-looking. The only resemblance Will has seen is their eyes – they have the same eyes, which can narrow, cat-like, gleaming a soft brown, or brighten with joy and show red in the sunlight.

Mischa spots him, and grins, waving wildly. Will raises a hand in reply, nodding in respect as she approaches. She's wearing her normal kit of riding boots, pale leggings, her smart-looking sports jacket, her helmet tucked under her arm. "Miss Lecter," Will says with another nod.

"Hi, Will!" she replies, showing all of her teeth in her smile. "How is my darling Pergalė today?"

"Same as ever," Will says, and hears, as if cued, Mischa's mare whinny from inside, hearing her mistress' voice. "I think she could benefit from a long walk today."

"How fortunate – that was my plan also," Mischa says brightly. Though both Lecter children are heavily accented from whatever Eastern European country they come from – Will doesn't think them friendly enough to ask – Mischa's grasp of English is a little more formal than that of her brother, hinting at lessened familiarity. As Will understands it, Hannibal spent most of his childhood in France, and then America, and Mischa joined him when she was older.

Will nods, turning away to put his eyes on Red again. He has started up another series of blusters, like he needs to perform for a new audience member. Will smirks; show-off. Gelding him would take a lot of that away, but Will senses the Vergers will want to breed him if he turns out to be a good showman.

"Who is this?" Mischa asks, catching Will's attention again. She is staring at Red, her eyes narrowed in the same way her brother's do, chin lifted; assessing, like Will, Red's stride and strength and his stamina.

"Red Morning Star," Will replies. "He was a new stallion acquired by the Vergers. I believe Miss Margot Verger is still with Mister Lecter."

Mischa nods.

"They want him to perform in puissance shows."

"Puissance?" Misha repeats, her lips pursing. "Yes, I think that will suit him. But we must correct his gait. Look." She nods to Red's forelegs, and Will sees it – good, he thought he was just imagining things, but Mischa has the sharpest eyes he knows. "He has the front of a dancer and the back of a jumper. Out of balance."

"I agree," Will says, and she grins at him, similarly proud that Will saw what she did. Will straightens up as Red snorts, and from the stables, Pergalė is whinnying shrilly, her door banging as she paws at it. "I won't keep you, Miss Lecter. Have a good ride."

"Thank you, Will!" she says, and she turns away with another smile, and calls in her mother tongue to her mare. Will smiles, listening to the animal quiet, and turns back to Red.

Red jerks his chin, huffing quietly, his sides heaving, and Will eyes him for another long moment, and then he digs his nail into a knot of thin, blue twine that's wrapped around two pieces of the corral – it was once, perhaps, a loop through which other lead reins could be tied or a horse could be secured while buyers discussed them. It puts up a good fight, but eventually unravels, and Will pulls back with a smile, wrapping it in a loose coil that hangs from his fingers.

He opens the corral gate and steps inside. Red has on his head a simple, black leather halter, no rein attached. Will pushes his lips together, breathes out – this first contact will be the baseline of whatever Red associates with him for the rest of their time together, so he has to make this count. He can't appear weak, but he can't be too scary either otherwise Red will never trust him.

He steps into the corral, bolting it behind him, and Red whinnies and lifts his forelegs, mimicking a rear-up, his ears turning back – but not flattening. He doesn't show his teeth.

Will lets Red circle around, but when Red turns to show Will his hindquarters, he lets the twine uncoil and flicks it gently at Red's haunches.

Red snorts, eyes him, and turns around. When he tries again, Will flicks him again – much too gentle to hurt, but sharp enough Red feels it; it's a warning against kicking out, against trying to fight back. In the wild, horses would use their teeth and hooves to make their point.

Red huffs, nostrils flared out. Will smiles, when he lowers his head a little, but doesn't turn away again. He steps forward. "There we go," Will purrs, and in his pocket he has some mints that he sneaks to the other horses, but he doesn't offer one yet. He keeps one in his closed fist, knowing Red can smell it. "C'mon, you giant. What else you gonna try?"

Red lowers his head further, until his muzzle drags along the ground. Then, he darts to the side, kicking up a spray of dirt, and Will laughs, wiping his hand over his face where some hit him. Red tries to show his hindquarters again and Will flicks at him, just like before, keeps himself facing Red, centered on his shoulders, as Red trots around the corral.

"I got all the time in the world," he warns the animal, as Red snorts and blusters again, pulls up short as if he can trick Will into turning too far. Seems put out, huffing in annoyance when Will proves too smart for that. Will laughs, when Red finally seems to calm, his ears rolling forward. He shakes his mane out and swishes his tail like a wagging dog.

Will hums, and then he goes to the edge of the corral, keeping his eyes on Red. He sits back, and bends down so he can keep his thighs on one of the metal bars, but his chest is behind it, and he can put his arms over the bar above and stay upright. Red snorts at him, walking slowly back and forth, side to side but getting a little closer each time, like he's testing the waters. He looks almost sheepish, like someone realizing they had been blowing things way out of proportion.

Will grins at him, and offers the mint with a flat palm.

Red perks up with a soft whinny, ears forward, and lips delicately at the mint. Will slides his hand back when it's empty, works his fingers in the bottom piece of the halter below his cheeks, and doesn't tug, but rests it there. When Red tries to pull back, Will's grip is secure, and the corral is strong enough that Will can't get pulled off his feet.

Red snorts at him, long lashes dipping over his dark, warm eyes. Will knows horses aren't capable of having thoughts like people do, don't understand things like taxes and God, but there seems to be some focused shine in Red's, and Will thinks, with a smile, that they have just come to some unspoken agreement.

"There we go," he purrs, and lets the twine go, petting over Red's big, warm cheek. The stallion breathes out heavily, warm on Will's arm and chest, and swishes his tail again, taking another slow step forward. Until his muzzle butts against Will's thigh and Will can scratch nicely beneath the fall of his forelock.

"I know, you just had to get it all outta your system," Will says, and he laughs when Red nudges at his pocket, seeking another mint. He pushes Red's forelock to one side, scratches over his forehead, and cups his cheeks, his muzzle, letting Red become accustomed to Will

touching him; to his scent and his voice. Red is still very sweaty, and will need a rinse-down before Will even thinks of getting him in a stall.

He ducks under the bars again, pushing himself to his feet to stand beside Red's shoulders. Red turns his head to follow Will, but remains still as Will tugs on his mane, petting his strong neck. He fits his shoulder to the place where Red's neck becomes his chest, grips him gently with wide, warm hands, and smiles when Red takes a step back, into the center of the corral.

He feeds him another mint in reward. He runs his hand down Red's left foreleg, pushes behind his knee until his weight gives and he bends it, and grabs his fetlock, pulling his hoof up and checking the grip of his shoes, the dirt caked in that he will have to pick out once he gets him out of the corral. But there's no inflammation, nothing he can see that he needs to worry about.

He lets Red's hoof go, waits until he settles. Red huffs at him, like a child being made to go see the doctor. Will grins, and nudges their shoulders together, scratching at his withers. "I know, I know, I'm just doing my job, be patient," he says, and Red huffs, and lowers his head. Will tests his chest and stomach, finds no odd lumps or anything hinting at former abuse. He's a good, healthy weight for an animal his size.

Will checks his other feet, pets over his sweaty haunches, and returns to Red's neck. He feeds Red another mint, as a reward for his patience and indulgence, and Red eyes him, his irises looking almost black now, with the sun setting.

"You gonna let me put you in a stall?" Will asks him, keeping his voice soft, and Red merely swishes his tail in answer. Will nods to himself, climbs out of the corral, and goes to the room where they keep all the halters and lead ropes. Pergalė is not in her stall – Mischa must have taken her out the back way.

Most of the stalls in the Lecter stables are full, and one of the geldings snorts and lifts his head over the edge of his stall as Will passes, whickering in greeting, ears forward. Will smiles, and nudges his muzzle gently, before he passes and gathers a long, red lead rope.

When he returns, the rope coiled in his hand, a tall shadow is in the walkway between the sets of stalls. Will pauses, and nods in greeting when he sees it's Francis – Hannibal's head trainer. He's a nice enough guy, if a little distant – he's a focused person, the kind of guy who cares more about the results than the means to get there, but he has never been cruel, and never been anything but perfectly pleasant.

Francis nods in reply, the scar on his lip making his smile look a little more savage than Will is sure he means it to be. "Graham," he says. His eyes fall to the rope in Will's hands, and he walks with Will to the entrance, so they can both see Red. "I was told you'll be training him."

Will nods. "Yeah, Lecter gave him to me as a personal project." He lifts a shoulder. "Not really sure why."

"I have a lot on my plate right now," Francis says, and Will nods – there's a big three-day event coming up at one of the courses in Baltimore. He's seen Francis running the horses

through their dressage paces, and one of the training yards has been filled with complex jump courses for weeks. "But you let me know if you need any help with him. Have you trained before?"

"Dogs," Will says, with a wry smile.

Francis grins at him. "You ride?"

"Used to, in Louisiana, but not since I came here."

Francis nods, his eyes darkening in thought as he looks to Red again. "Well, like I said," Francis murmurs, and holds his hand out. They clasp forearms, and shake once. "Let me know. He's got a good build for jumping, and stamina from what I've seen, but going power isn't everything when it comes to jumps."

Will nods. "Any advice just for now?" he asks.

Francis hums. "If Lecter approves it, I'd take him out for a ride in the morning. See how he handles – some horses respond better to legs, others to the rein." Will nods – he knows this, but waving away Francis' advice holds an arrogance Will doesn't have. "You'll need a good idea of what his limits are, and how he reacts to distractions. If he shies away from certain things."

Will nods again, and winces, huffing a laugh. "Truthfully I anticipate a lot of falls in the near future."

Francis laughs, loud and low. Will sees Red's head perk up, and he tosses it, trotting a tight circle within the corral. "Yeah. I'd invest in some Tiger Balm, painkillers, and if you don't already, a good stretching routine. And don't ride in jeans – trust me, European saddles don't make them comfortable."

Will grins. "I'll remember that."

"Good luck, Graham," Francis says, and turns away, disappearing out the other door towards one of the livery yards. Will smiles, and goes back to Red, undoing the gate to the corral and pleased when Red quiets at his approach. He feeds Red a mint, and clips the lead rope beneath his cheeks where there's a ring in the halter.

Despite his blustering and all his brashness before, Red is either tired or trusting enough not to put up a fight, as Will turns and leads him out, one hand at the excess of the rope, the other loose beneath his chin. He leads Red to the stables, and into the stall farthest from Pergalė – she is the only unfixed mare they currently house, and he doesn't need either of them working each other up.

He detaches the rope once Red is inside, fetches a hoof pick and cleans out his hooves, and then a bucket of water and a brush, combing the warm water over his sweaty neck, his shoulders, his flanks and haunches. Red lips at the bundle of haylage already inside, and Will makes sure the trough of water is full, and that he has enough bedding to be comfortable, before he gathers all his things and leaves the stall, bolting it behind him.

He puts everything away and goes back to Red, finds him munching away, and Will clicks his tongue. Red blinks at him, lifts his head, and Will holds out a closed fist. Red whickers, and walks up to him, for long enough that Will can unbuckle his halter and leave it on the hook beside the door.

He scratches over Red's cheeks and forehead, and corrects the fall of his forelock, as Red sighs, looking at him with low-lidded eyes. "Get some rest, big guy," Will says, cupping his whiskery chin as Red snuffles against his chest, muzzle rubbing wetly on Will's sweat-stained shirt. "Tomorrow we start work for real."

He leaves, checking all the stalls, that all the horses have food and water, and then he grabs his coat from the little closet where the hands keep their extra clothes, and dons it on his way out.

He freezes in place when he sees Hannibal, regarding the open corral with a look of deep contemplation. He turns when he senses Will, their eyes meeting, and Will swallows, finishes putting his coat on, and approaches him.

"Everyone's bedded down for the night," he says.

Hannibal nods, and smiles at him. "How fares our newest friend?"

"He's alright – got him calmed down eventually," Will says with a shrug. "Francis said I should take him for a ride tomorrow, see how he handles. If that's okay with you."

"Of course," Hannibal replies with a wave of his hand. Then, he pauses, and frowns. "You spoke with Francis?"

Will nods.

Hannibal lets out a sound, not quite displeased, but confused. Will tilts his head, and Hannibal sighs. "Will, I acknowledge that you have no practical experience here, and in regard to training horses, but I gave you sole responsibility of Red for a reason." Will presses his lips together, licks them. Hannibal fixes him with a look that makes Will feel small. "I have great faith in your instincts. Please do not ignore them for the sake of listening to someone with more experience."

Will frowns. "You want me to ignore his advice?"

"Not at all, but I'm simply saying that Francis has a certain way of doing things. A way that has proven very successful in the past. But we are attempting a new challenge, and I chose you because of your newness. If I wanted more of the same, you would still be mucking out stalls."

Will isn't quite sure if the sentiment is pleasing, but it flusters him all the same. His cheeks heat up and he ducks his head, nods, and runs a hand through his hair.

"Of course, I -." He swallows, licks his lips again, and meets Hannibal's sharp eyes. They are dark in the dusk-light, and yet they shine. He cannot say anything else, so he just nods again.

"Of course."

"I expect great things, Will, from both you and our new friend." Hannibal's expression softens, and he smiles in a way almost fond. "Good luck on your ride tomorrow. I will be gone for most of the day, but when I return, I would like a full report of Red's handling." Will blinks at him. "Come to the office at the end of the day so we can discuss your plans."

For a moment, Will can only stare – he's been in the house only once before, and never in Hannibal's office. It had always seemed like one of those private places, like a secret room in a castle no one is ever supposed to go.

But Hannibal is looking at him expectantly, and Will flushes further, and nods. "Yeah. Absolutely, Sir. I will."

"Excellent." Hannibal's smile widens, and he gives Will a nod, turning away. "Good night, Will."

"Good night," Will replies, softly, and watches him leave. Shaken, shocked, and suddenly full of renewed energy, Will goes to his car, gets in, and drives home.

Chapter 3

Will sleeps in the same room as his dogs, on a mattress in what should be the living room. Upstairs, the rooms are bare except for the stuff he never bothered to unpack and should probably get rid of, since he's lived in Wolf Trap going on five years now and clearly has no need for what's inside. It's mostly sentimental stuff from his childhood, and his dad when he died.

Inside one box, though, is his dad's old riding gear. And Will's, though Will has far outgrown the softer leggings that they used to wear around his uncle's ranch, and they usually used Western-style saddles, which are much more forgiving on jeans and boots than the sleeker European saddles.

But in one of his dad's boxes is a pair of old, worn pants that aren't stretchy material, but soft like sweatpants, form-fitting. He pulls them on over his underwear, huffs when he discovers he ended up a little taller than his father was, and tucks the bunched ankle holes into a pair of tall, thick socks, and then his hiking boots over them to hide the edges. He pulls on a t-shirt and a hoodie over that, then his jacket. It's definitely not up to the uniform standard of Hannibal, Mischa, or any of their professional trainers and jockeys, but Hannibal wanted something new; he's going to get something new, and that means Will running Red ragged in casual clothes unless he wants to spring for something high-end.

He combs his hands through his hair, forgoing a shower, knowing he's going to get gross and sweaty by the time the day is over. Hopefully Hannibal is forgiving when it comes to that. The reminder that he's been invited to Hannibal's office, to go over his plans for training Red, fills him with a strange, elated anxiety. His stomach flutters when he thinks about it, so he tries not to think about it.

He clicks his tongue to summon his dogs' attention, and opens the door to let them out. They escape the house in a flurry of woofs and playful snarls, barreling and rolling over each other in an effort to find places to mark and sniff.

Winston, as he normally does, lingers behind, nosing around the edge of the porch instead of fleeing out into the field. Will clicks his tongue again, drawing the dog's attention, and grins when Winston's ears perk up, his jaws parted to let his tongue roll out.

He steps down, his boots sinking into the soft mud around his house, and holds out a hand. "Care to dance?" he asks playfully.

Winston grins at him, sinking down to his chest, tail wagging wildly. Will straightens, and brings his hand in a semi-closed fist to his chest, and Winston walks forward, perked up and attentive, his eyes on Will's hand. When Will steps back, Winston follows, and worms between his legs in a tight figure-eight, coming to a stop in front of Will again, half-sunk in a sitting position, tail brushing through the grass as he keeps wagging shamelessly. Will opens his hand, lifts it, and Winston jumps up to press his nose to Will's palm, sinking down slowly when Will lowers his hand. Will's smile widens, and he steps back again. Each time he does,

Winston goes between his legs, warm flanks brushing behind his knee and in front of his other one, ducking between Will's feet each time he steps back.

Will halts, brings his feet together, and twists his hand with a sharp whistle through his teeth, and Winston jumps up to his hindlegs, facing away from Will, his head tilted back so he can see Will's fingers. Will twirls them in a little circle, mimicking a spinning top, and Winston dances around on his hindlegs until he's facing Will again. Back, facing away, and forward once more.

Will smiles, and drops his hand as Winston goes to all fours. He kneels down and cups the dog's head, petting over his soft neck, and kisses his forehead. "Good boy," he says, and Winston barks and licks Will's cheek.

Will stands, and summons his dogs with another louder, longer whistle. They all come back in tight formation, jostling to be first in line so they can claim their favorite beds, even though Will was careful to scent-mark each of them so they always get their favorite. Winston is last, and plops himself down at the end of Will's bed, on the floor, resting his muzzle on his outstretched forelegs.

"Be good, guys," Will calls, checking their bowls to be sure they have food and water. He pats down his pockets for his keys, wallet, and phone, before he reaches for the door. He closes it and locks it, and goes to his car.

Will makes it a habit to try and get to the stables before six in the morning, both because that's when no guests will be around to see the glamorous chore of mucking out stables, and because traffic is kind to him that early in the morning.

He parks his car near the livery yard behind the stables, and gets out, shrugging off his coat and hanging it in the stable hand closet as he passes the door. The scent of rich haylage, fresh manure, and the unmistakable musk of horses washes over him in something familiar and welcome – horses have a distinct aroma, one that settles and soothes him, different than his dogs and the smell of pigs or cattle.

He goes around the stable, and pauses, eyeing the jumping course that's been set up in preparation for the three-day event fast approaching. Most of the jumps within the ring are oxers – a set of two raised poles spaced out to make the horse jump for longer to clear it – and cross rails, where the brightly-colored poles are braced to form a dipping 'X' in the middle. There is a shallow, hollowed-out ditch behind one vertical that is meant to mimic a pool jump, and in the center, a mean-looking triple bounce.

Will winces, internally. He's going to have to get very good, very quickly, to be able to guide Red and train him to know what to do for jumps like that. Bounces leave no room for a horse to take a stride in-between, and triples take a lot of skill and power to do cleanly, let alone well. Will doesn't doubt Red has the power to clear every jump in this ring, but over-extending can be just as bad as underachieving, especially when it comes to puissance.

His attention is drawn by movement, and he turns his head as he sees Francis astride one of the Lecters' more seasoned mares. They have a second stable for the horses that have proven themselves in the ring, away from the geldings and any visiting animals. The mare is a dapple grey, splattering to black on her haunches, legs, and muzzle, her mane a tight-set row of knots that they would put her in for a dressage competition. Francis has her in a black bridle and saddle, and guards around her shins to protect her from knocking against jumps, and looks tall and imposing as he walks her to the edge of the ring, turns her so he can lean down and open the gate, and kicks it out, walking her inside and closing it behind him.

Will walks to the edge of the ring and puts his arms on the topmost fence slat, his chin resting on his hands as Francis walks her around the edges of each jump, letting her eye them as he measures the strides and heights of each.

Their eyes meet, and Francis smiles at him. "Early riser?" he asks. Will presses his lips together, nodding. Francis walks the mare over and brings her to a halt beside Will. Will looks up to keep their eyes locked, as Francis' bright eyes rake him up and down. If he has anything to say about Will's choice of dress, which looks even shabbier next to Francis' clean-cut riding gear, he keeps it to himself. "Good luck."

Will huffs. "You mind if I watch for a bit?"

Francis shrugs, and leads the mare away. "Have at it." He clicks his tongue and digs his heels in, and Will watches the mare's head rise, ears forward, and she gives a quiet grunt as Francis urges her into a canter, circling the worn-in track around the edge of the ring.

Will watches closely, eyeing Francis as he gathers the reins up, keeping her head and neck tightly-risen, and leads her to the first jump – it's a cross rail, and she clears it easily, tail flicking up as her hindlegs clear the fence. She snorts as she lands, and Francis settles in the saddle, drawing her one-handed to circle around to the next fence.

She changes her lead leg, once, then again, and Will watches the moves Francis makes to guide her to doing it – digs in back with one heel, nudges forward with the opposite toe to urge the correct foreleg into the lead of the canter gait. He presses his lips together as Francis leads the mare to one of the oxers, lets her dance in place for a moment before he rises up, over her neck, lets her gather speed and fling herself over the wide jump.

Will smiles. "She handles well," he calls, and Francis grins at him, letting her canter away from the jump and circling around to the part of the fence where Will is standing. "You gonna three-day her?"

Francis nods, pulling her to a halt again. Her nostrils are flared wide, eyes dark as she tilts her head up and stretches out her neck once Francis lets the rein long enough. "Hopefully. She's got a problem with stamina, but I've been training her to try and handle cross country." He gives Will a conspiratorial smile. "Something I sense your charge will have no problem with."

"No," Will says, and laughs, holding out his hand to let the mare lip at his fingers. "The hard part will be holding him back, I think."

Francis nods knowingly. "I know some tricks to get a horse to slow down, if you need help," he offers.

Will presses his lips together, remembering Hannibal's words, and draws his hand back. "I'll remember that," he says with a small nod, and pushes himself away from the fence. Francis nods again, digs in with his heels and guides the mare back to the jumps.

Will rolls his shoulders, and goes to the tack room, grabbing a saddle and bridle big enough for Red. He goes to Red's stall and plops the tack down, earning a snort from the horse as he perks up, lifting his head, and eyes Will with a big, black eye.

"Hey, big guy," Will says, and folds his arms over the edge of the stall as Red comes over to him, snorting loudly, and nuzzles at his hands. Will pets over his wide cheeks, scratches his forehead. Red snorts at him again, tail swishing. "How you feel about a saddle and bridle, huh?"

Red looks at him like it's a stupid question.

Will grins. "Fair enough." He lifts the saddle and sets it on the edge of the stall, grabs the bridle and loops the reins over his shoulder, and steps in. Red snorts again, but his head is low, and Will grabs the forehead piece and ear piece, settling his hand over the edges of the bit, and feeds it between Red's lips.

Red blusters, tail flicking at Will in protest, but Will ignores it, feeds his thumb in behind Red's teeth, forcing his jaws apart, and smiles as he works the bit behind Red's teeth, pulling on the ear strap and tucking Red's ears beneath it so they are free. He pulls his forelock from beneath the forehead strap and checks the tightness of the cheek pieces, making sure they're not tugging uncomfortably on the corners of his mouth.

Red snorts at him, chewing lazily around the bit, and Will rolls his eyes. He grabs the saddle and hauls it over Red's broad back, working it forward until the pommel sits just shy of his withers. He lets the stirrups fall on either side and reaches below to grab the girth strap, holding the reins loosely in his other hand, and tightens it until he can't pull it any more.

He sighs, and lets it go loose, waits for the tell-tale blow-out of Red's stomach, and tightens it one more notch.

Red snorts, and looks at him with nothing short of betrayal.

"This ain't my first rodeo, big guy," Will tells him, working four fingers beneath the girth strap to make sure it's not too tight. Red rolls his eyes and shakes his mane out, and Will grins at him, nudging their shoulders together.

"You ready?" he asks, and Red eyes him again, but seems much more perked up as Will leads him out of the stall, letting the door remain open. He walks Red over to the mounting block, works the reins over his head, and grabs the pommel and the back of the saddle, hauling himself up and swinging his right leg over.

He kicks and settles, working his toes into the stirrups, and gathers the reins until there's only a little slack. Red tosses his head, tail swishing in excitement, and Will clicks his tongue experimentally, turning Red around his right heel and leading him to the open stable door. On his way out, he leans over and grabs a helmet, settling it on his head and fixing the strap as they emerge into the dawning light.

There is a small trail that leads away from the stables, towards a cluster of trees through which there are riding paths, and then open fields. Will knows once he gets Red to the open it'll likely be a free-for-all, but he forces himself not to tense up in anticipation. Horses can sense stuff like that, just like dogs – they know when the human is nervous.

He sits lax and heavy in the saddle, letting himself get used to Red's long, lazy stride. Notes that his head is raised, nostrils flared wide, gut vibrating in heavy breaths as he gets ready to run.

"Easy now," he warns, unable to fight the drawl of his youth coming out since that's how he used to talk to horses when he was a kid. He puts a hand on Red's shoulder, leading him to the path. Red snorts heavily, dancing in place as Will keeps a tight hold on his reins. It'll be difficult to convince Red to keep to a walk or trot, as excited as he is.

Well, Will's nothing if not good at letting an animal run itself ragged.

Will grins to himself, gathers the reins and puts his hands up high on Red's neck. Lifts from the saddle, and digs in with his heels.

"Alright, you monster," he murmurs, as Red rears up a little, haunches bunching, ready. "Let's see what you've got."

Red leaps into a long-legged, fast canter, bolting towards the trees, and Will catches Francis watching them run away. He grins, widely, and as the trees rise up to meet them, he can't help laughing, and Red whinnies shrilly in answer, like he's laughing too.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Red *flies*. The stallion barrels down the running path and through the trees as Will clings to his neck, settles high over his shoulders so he can run as fast as he likes. Beyond the little copse of trees are open fields, and Red flings himself into them. Between each one are fences and stone walls, broken by gates so that they can separate whatever livestock is in each, and Will grits his teeth, prepared to slow Red to let him through each one, but the stallion tosses his head when Will tries, rears up in another powerful stride, and clears the first gate without hesitating.

Will laughs, as Red's hooves crash down into the grass on the other side of the gate, and he keeps going, hardly breaking stride. Red is fearless, doesn't seem to even notice anything except the promise of a wide-open stretch of grass, mud, and gravel over which to run.

By Will's estimate, they gallop for about two miles before Red finally shows signs of slowing, blustering heavily, his nostrils flared wide and flanks damp with sweat. He slows to a canter, panting heavily, and Will settles in the saddle, also soaked with sweat and covered in clinging pollen and dirt, kicked up by Red's hooves.

Will leads him in a wide circle in the field, letting himself get a feel for Red's stride – he's long-legged, and his canter is a smooth three-beat that honestly feels like sitting in a rocking chair. Red's ears are perked up, attentive, he lets Will gather his reins and arches his neck, shortening his strides, blows out another heavy, snorting breath when Will loosens them to see what feels the most comfortable.

Will tests Red's other reflexes, old memories in him telling him to lead Red in a straight line and nudge his left heel back, his right toe forward, encouraging Red to lead with his right leg. The stallion shifts his stride easily, leads with the right, and Will turns him right until they're facing the other way. He does the same on the opposite side, notes that Red seems to prefer leading with his left. That kind of thing will be important when it comes time for him to start jumping a course.

He eyes the height of the gates Red jumped, guesses they would be a little over four feet tall. Nothing terribly strenuous for a horse Red's size, but the puissance record is just above seven feet, and it can be daunting to any animal. Most puissance courses have large jumps to lead up to the big one, too, so Will must be sure Red won't shy away from a fence of any height, and that he won't tire out too quickly.

He has the stamina, and definitely has the heart for it, but Will has no idea of Red's eventing history, and jumping a course is not the same as wildly flinging himself over a field in an open gate. They must be more controlled, must know when to hold back and when to give it their all. So, too, Will must be prepared to know everything there is to know about Red's tics and triggers, for whoever Hannibal selects to ride him during shows.

That thought brings a little pang of melancholy, for Will knows he likely won't be the one selected to ride Red when it's time. The thought of leading this animal to victory is an enticing one, but Will is simply too green, his name totally unknown. Hannibal would never trust him to actually do well in a show, when the time comes.

Despite how broad and comfortable Red's back is, Will is sore, his thighs and ankles protesting the long gallop, his palms tense and aching from gripping the reins so hard, his neck stiff. He fits the saddle of his thumb beneath his hand and carefully tilts his chin, his neck giving a series of sharp pops as he cracks it. He does it the other way, too, and Red snorts.

His ears perk up, and Will follows his gaze to find that Red's attention was caught by the slip of a small russet fox. He doesn't tense, because he doesn't want Red to panic, but he keeps the fox in his sights as the little animal prowls along the edge of the field.

Red lowers his head, shakes his mane and lets out a curious whinny. Will smiles, settles a hand on his shoulder and scratches at the bunch of his sweaty mane along his withers.

"Want to go see?" he asks, and squeezes his heels into Red's flanks. Red snorts again, walking over slowly to investigate the fox. The animal looks at them for a long moment, black eyes sharp and shining, and when they are about five feet away, it yips at them, and slinks through the fencing, towards the trees.

The sound Red lets out is almost disappointed, and he tosses his head, working his chin up and down to make the reins jangle, munching on the bit. Will turns him away and eases him into a trot, rising and falling with his strides. His trot is a little bouncier than what is comfortable, but he's steady, and Will makes him canter again towards the nearest gate, back towards the stables.

He pulls Red to a halt, so he can angle him and lean down to unlatch it as Francis had done in the ring. Red snorts, haunches tensing up, and tosses his head with a shrill whinny, jerking away from the fence. Will doesn't have time to right himself before he's abruptly left with no horse beneath him, and he falls half-on the gate, winded and wincing as his shoulder and hip collide with it, one arm braced over it and toes barely catching themselves on the ground.

Red whinnies, rearing up and prancing away from the fence, and Will glares at him, righting himself and rubbing at his injured shoulder. "That was rude," he says with a roll of his eyes, and Red snorts at him, bright eyes fixed on Will. Will unlatches the gate and holds it open just a foot, so Red doesn't get it into his head to bolt through it, and walks towards the stallion.

Red, at least, doesn't try and get away from him, and lets Will take his reins in hand. He sighs, and pets over the horse's sweaty neck. "Was it the pressure?" he murmurs, mostly to himself, and presses, testing, at the girth strap around Red's body. Red nickers at him, lashes low, ears flopping to the side. "The gate?"

He tries to lead Red over to it and Red balks again, but Will is ready, and lets him dance away a few paces before Red quiets. Will frowns over at the gate, sighs through his nose, and looks

back at the horse. He runs the reins over his head and holds the very end of them in a loose grip.

"Come on, you monster," he murmurs, and walks over to the gate. He sets the latch on its edge and opens it, and the thing gives a rather aggravating, protesting shriek. Red snorts heavily, tugging on the reins, trying to get away.

Will looks at him, and then back at the gate. "*Oh*." He doesn't like the noise. Will nods to himself, and brings Red a few feet away from the fence, resting his reins over the edge and tying them in a loose knot. Then, the goes back to the gate, and opens it all the way. When he pushes it quickly, it doesn't make as much noise, but Red still gives a protesting snort, body quivering and tail swishing wildly at his own flanks.

Will smiles at him and lets out a soothing noise. The corral gates and the stable doors don't make any noise when opened, so it makes sense that Red hasn't reacted to them until now. He takes Red's reins again and carefully guides him through the gate, and holds his hand out as far as he can when he closes it so Red can be as far away as possible.

"Better?" he asks, when the latch is closed again. Red lips at his hand, shakes his mane out, but the look in his eyes seems almost grateful. Will pulls a mint from his pocket and feeds it to him. "I'm not getting off and opening each of these every time we go riding, you know. You're gonna have to suck it up."

Red snorts at him, and Will smiles, scratching beneath his forehead strap and correcting his forelock.

"Don't worry, big guy, I won't let anything happen to you."

His legs ache from the sudden landing, and being made to walk, but he appreciates the opportunity to stretch his legs, so he walks with Red to the next fence, and repeats the process, making sure Red can stand far enough away that he's comfortable when Will opens the gates and latches each shut behind them.

By the time they clear the last one, Will is panting and sweaty, the humid and warm air making him flushed, his clothes sticking to his body. The sun has just started to set, coloring the air orange and pink, and Will leads Red over to part of the fence he can climb onto, and he mounts the horse with a grunt, wincing when the sore innards of his thighs and his aching ankles are forced to contort to the horse's shape again.

"Come on," he murmurs, and clicks his tongue. Red raises his head, turns it to nudge at Will's toe in thanks, and breaks into another smooth canter, recovered enough that his stride is easy and long. They merge back into the trees and Will settles, taking his toes out of the stirrups and just letting himself hang as Red runs.

When he comes back to the stables, he sees the ring Francis was using has been vacated, and eyes it in consideration. Fences and gates are one thing, but actual jumps with posts and all those flashy colors and bushes could be another form of distraction.

The gate is open, and Will slides his feet back into the stirrups and guides Red into the ring. Red perks up, nosing curiously at the nearest fence as Will walks him by it.

"Whatcha think?" Will murmurs, petting over his mane. "Want to try?"

Red snorts, his shoulders rising as he drums his forelegs in place, like a child might jump up and down in anticipation. Will grins, and digs in with his heels, guiding Red to a canter that circles the ring, through the worn-in track.

He knows now that Red has absolutely no qualms with the height, but he's undoubtedly tired and Will doesn't want to push him too much. He guides Red towards one of the cross rail jumps, which is shallower in the middle, and Red whinnies, head lifting, gathers his speed and runs for the jump, clearing it easily. Will intended to steer him right, but Red veers abruptly left and it's only through keeping his seat and gripping his mane tightly that Will manages to stay on.

Will rolls his eyes and swats the stallion's shoulder playfully. "Look, you're going to have to trust that I know what I'm doing," he tells Red, and Red snorts, shaking his mane out, returning to his smooth canter as Will finally manages to convince him to go right, and leads him towards the double jump. Red runs for it, blustering heavily, and clears the first jump and Will knows immediately he jumped too far, and left no room for the necessary stride between them.

Red bounces, instead, and clears the second, but Will winces when he hears Red's back hooves clip the pole. It doesn't fall, but a mistake like that would cost them points in a competition. He'll have to figure out how to pull Red back, so he doesn't do something like that during a show.

He slows Red to a walk, noting the tremor in the animal beneath him. "That's enough for today," he says gently, and brings him to a halt, dismounting, and takes his helmet off, shaking his sweaty hair from his face. He runs his hand through it and gathers Red's reins.

His attention is drawn, as he's leading Red to the stables, by the sound of a car approaching. It's Hannibal's, the Bentley he drives gleaming brightly in the setting sun. Will goes still, pets over Red's shoulder as he leads Red to a water trough and lets him drink. The horse's heavy slurps cover up the rumble of the engine, as Hannibal parks by the main building, and gets out of the car.

He's alone, dressed in one of those well-made suits the price of which probably rivals Will's monthly salary, and their eyes meet. Hannibal smiles at him, and gives him a nod of greeting, walking over.

"Have you just returned?" he asks, knowing Will would never let himself or one of Hannibal's horses be so unkempt if there was time to clean up.

Will nods, and pets Red's neck. "He rides well," he replies. Hannibal nods, looking Red over in that cool, assessing way he does. Will, the same, though his eyes seem notably darker when he takes in Will's sweaty, flushed state. Probably just a trick of the light. "He's got a

problem with gates, though. Or, more specifically, the noise they make when they open and shut. The ones in the fields."

Hannibal nods. "I can have someone go out and repair them," he says with a wave of his hand. Will isn't sure he even owns the fields there or has right to go about oiling those gates, but he doesn't ask. Hannibal is the kind of person to just do things; asks forgiveness rather than permission.

He nods, instead of saying anything else.

"I have a few matters to attend to, so feel free to take your time bedding him down. Please come to my office when you're done," Hannibal says, and waits for Will's accepting nod again, before he turns away and strides into the house.

Will shivers, watching him go, the sweat on his body rapidly cooling and with the nighttime approaching, a chill runs sharply through him. He tugs on Red's reins and makes him stop drinking, leads him into his stall, and pulls his saddle off, first, wincing at the grip of sweat and horse hair clinging to the inside.

He sets it over the door, and removes Red's bridle, wiping the bit down so it's clean of Red's saliva. Red snorts, shaking his whole body out, and Will returns the saddle and bridle to their hooks, retrieving a short-bristled brush and a sweat scraper, a mane comb and a hoof pick.

Red submits to his cleaning and grooming amiably, chewing noisily from his net of haylage, obviously tired from his long run, his weight on only three legs. Will scrapes the sweat from his flanks, neck, and haunches, huffing at the amount as it drips onto the floor when he shakes the scraper out. He combs Red's mane of any tangles, ridding him of dust and pollen, and picks his hooves clean. Then, he brushes the horse down, making sure the saddle will not leave him with any uncomfortable kinks in his hair.

When he's done, Red noses at him, and Will feels him a mint, smiling indulgently. "Get some rest, big guy," he murmurs fondly, and leaves with all his gear, putting them away. There is a tall, dirty mirror in the tack room, and Will eyes himself with resignation. He looks like a mess; sweaty, dirty, covered in horse hair. Certainly not fit to go into a place as clean and lordly as Hannibal's house.

But he didn't bring any other clothes with him. He scrapes the mud off his boots using the edge of the hoof pick, dips his hands in water and runs them through his hair to try and calm it down, and dons his jacket. He's sore and stinks of horse, and walks stiffly out of the stables and towards the office.

The inside of the house is cold, air-conditioning flooding the space and Will shivers, pulling his jacket more tightly around himself. He contemplates the clean, white tile in the foyer and thinks about removing his boots, but his socks are slick with sweat and sweat stains are probably even worse than dirt.

He finds Hannibal's office easily, the door cracked open and soft light from the desk lamp flooding the room. Behind the desk, Hannibal sits, and he looks up and smiles in greeting when Will knocks and pushes the door open.

Hannibal eyes him, looking him up and down. If he has any negative thoughts about Will's state, he doesn't voice them, nor does he let them show on his face. He presses his lips together and stands. "Would you like something to drink?"

"Water, please," Will replies, suddenly so thirsty, and Hannibal nods. There's a large metal jug, covered in condensation, by his desk, along with glasses and bottles of wine and port. Hannibal pours him a glass of ice water and Will takes it with a grateful sigh, wetting his tongue. Hannibal pours himself wine, and circles to a pair of chairs on the other side of his office. He sits in the nearest one, facing the door.

Will takes the other.

He sips at his water, wincing when his bones and muscles settle with protesting throbs in the chair. It's comfortable, thickly-padded and leather, and Will sinks into it with another grateful noise. Hannibal smiles at the sound. "Sore?" he assumes.

Will nods. "Been a while since I rode a horse for that long."

Hannibal hums, and sips his wine, an expression of understanding on his face. "Riding is physically demanding, for both horse and man," he says, and Will nods, curling both hands around his glass. "How did Red handle?"

"Very well," Will replies. "His canter is one of the smoothest I've ever felt. He's got a lot of stamina, and doesn't seem to care how high a fence is before he tries to clear it, which is promising." He pauses, and licks his lips, takes another drink. "Doesn't startle easy – we met a fox on our hack, and he didn't care. Just the fence thing."

Hannibal nods again. "That's good," he murmurs, and contemplates his wine. "Mischa mentioned to me that we will need to strengthen his forelegs."

Will hums in agreement. "He's strong, but unbalanced. Shouldn't be hard, though."

"That's good," Hannibal says again. In his following silence, Will tilts his head until his neck cracks, hissing in pain, and squeezes his thighs together until his lower back pops. Hannibal's attention is drawn by the noises, and he tilts his head. "Hopefully you will benefit from the training, also."

Will flushes. "I'll get used to it," he murmurs.

Hannibal stands, and sets his wine down. "Come here," he says, and Will blinks at him, but obeys, and freezes when Hannibal approaches him. Hannibal's hands are warm and wide, and he circles Will, flattens his hands on Will's shoulders. Even through his jacket, Will can feel the strength in them, and groans weakly when Hannibal finds a thick cluster of knots between his shoulder blades. He doesn't press down, but tuts in sympathy. "You will have to be certain to stretch before and after your rides; a stiff rider makes a stiff horse."

Will huffs. "Francis suggested Tiger Balm."

Hannibal makes another quiet sound, and leaves Will. He goes to his desk and pulls from it a large jar, plain white, and hands it to Will. "Mischa and I use this," he says. Will opens it, sees a thick Vaseline-like jelly inside. It doesn't smell as bad as Tiger Balm, at least; subtly minty, and thick like inhaling smoke. "It's a concoction of my own making, and has proven very effective."

Will smiles at him. "You really don't want me taking Francis' advice, do you?" he says.

Hannibal's eyes flash, something unnamable in his dark irises. For a moment, Will fears he might have offended Hannibal, but then he smiles. "No," he murmurs. "But I'm perfectly comfortable with you taking mine."

Will presses his lips together, nods, and slides the jar into the pocket of his jacket.

Hannibal approaches him again, takes Will's chin in both hands, and slides them to his neck. Will freezes, gasping, but Hannibal's eyes aren't on him – they are on Will's neck, his brow creased as his strong fingers deftly feel the tendons and muscles in Will's neck.

He hums. "You hunch too much," he says, and slides his hands down, forcing Will's shoulders to lower. "Keep your shoulders relaxed. It will help."

Will is speechless, and flushes very deeply when Hannibal takes his hands away, almost absently sniffing at his fingers, before he lets them drop. For the life of him, Will can't figure out why his heart is racing so suddenly, so heavily.

He swallows. "Any other advice?" he says, and again, doesn't know why his voice is so hoarse.

Hannibal smiles at him, wide enough to show his teeth. "Just to stay the course. I trust in your abilities, Will, and have a lot of faith in you. Red seems to, as well. I think you will make a good team."

Will blinks at him, and frowns. "But I'm not going to be the one jumping him, am I?"

Hannibal's head tilts. "Why not?"

Will blinks again. Swallows, and feels small when he ducks his head. His neck hurts, and he rubs over the back of it, the muscles tense under his hand. "I'm not a rider," he says weakly, and it feels like a stupid thing to say. "I mean, I've never even been to a show. I don't…" he trails off, and finishes with a helpless shrug, "know how."

Hannibal considers this.

Then, he smiles, and it's wide enough to crinkle his eyes at the corners. "Then I will show you," he says, in that same way he does, like nothing ever troubles him. Will stares, wide-eyed, and Hannibal looks away with another considering hum. "We will both go to the three-day event next week, and I will show you the standard procedure, the training rings, the overall," he gestures vaguely, "ambiance. I assure you, it's not as scary as you'd think."

Will laughs, because if he doesn't laugh he doesn't know what he'll do. But going to a show is something he's always wanted to do, and he'd be a fool to reject the offer. "Thank you, Sir," he says.

Hannibal smiles, pleased at Will's eagerness. He looks Will up and down again. "We shall have to get you something suitable to wear," he muses, almost to himself, as though he is Will and Will is Red. Will rubs the back of his neck again, flushing deeply. "I'll take care of it. For now, I want you to only focus on Red, and his training."

Will nods.

"I won't let you down."

Hannibal smiles. "Trust me, Will, I never doubted that for a second."

Chapter End Notes

is this lowkey turning into a sugar daddy au?? am I going to just let it happen? the answer is yes, to both.

Chapter 5

That night, Will showers and dresses in a t-shirt and underwear, letting his dogs out and taking advantage of the warm air to sit outside and enjoy the pleasant heat, watching as the sunset finally gives up its light and the night turns dark.

He has the jar Hannibal gave him beside him, and unscrews it, taking another sniff. The thick mint flavor floods his mouth and nose, and he scoops some onto his fingers, testing the feel of it. He has never been a huge fan of lotion, finds that it clings like a film to his skin and makes him uncomfortable, but he's willing to give this stuff a shot, and bear it if it works.

He sets the jar down, wets both hands, and starts to rub it into his legs. The gel melts into his skin as though soaking into it, and immediately warms when it touches him. Will sighs, toes curling as the odd numbing sensation takes over. He rubs it carefully onto his thighs, paying special attention to where he's most sore, pleased that it takes effect so quickly. It's not long before his legs are completely relaxed, the sharp ache dulled to a soft throb as he works the gel into his skin. It doesn't feel greasy or unpleasant, which he's grateful for, and aside from the numbness and the smell he wouldn't know anything was there.

He'll have to thank Hannibal, because he can't deny that it works like a Goddamn charm. Winston trots up to him, panting, and sits at his feet. He noses at Will's knee curiously, smelling the stuff, and Will smiles at him.

"Not bad, right?" he murmurs. Winston's ears perk up at the sound of his voice, his tail swishing. He'll have to wait until the morning to see if it lasts as long and is as effective as Tiger Balm, but so far it's a promising relief from the physical taxation of riding a horse for so long.

He takes more out of the jar and bows forward, ducking his head so he can rub the back of his neck and his shoulders. The chill water dripping from his hair makes the scent of it sharper, and Will sighs, breathing it in deeply to let the mint clear his lungs. He puts his free hand behind his elbow, pushing until his shoulder cracks, and sighs when he can reach the tense cluster of knots between his shoulder blade and spine.

The gel does its job there, too, and soon Will barely feels any aches in him at all. With its absence, a bone-deep tiredness comes, making his lashes lower and his head feel heavy. Perhaps there's a sedative in here as well – he wonders if he'll ever ask. Wonders if Hannibal would even tell him.

He screws the jar shut and takes it in hand, pushing himself to his feet. He whistles for his dogs to return and lets them all inside, and collapses onto his bed, exhausted and knowing it's only the beginning, if he's going to be training Red as much as he needs to, to get him ready to show. He doesn't know when, exactly, the next puissance show is, but the qualifiers can't be far away. 'Tis the season, after all.

"…Wait a second. He did *what.*"

"He offered to take me to the show next week," Will says with a shrug, most of his attention on mucking out Pergalė's stall while Mischa takes her out for her ride. Most of the stalls are empty, the various owners and patrons of the Lecter stables having cleared their horses out for the show season, or just for the summer. Red is the only one still remaining, content to stand and dose until Will leads him out and cleans his own stall.

Beverly lets out an excited, manic-sounding gasp, covering her mouth with both hands. "Oh my *God*," she breathes, and Will straightens, fixing her with a look. "That's so freakin' awesome!"

"Chill," he mutters, wincing at the high pitch her voice has taken. "God, you'd think I just told you I won the lottery or something."

"Will, *Hannibal Lecter himself* just invited you to a show with him. That doesn't just happen," Beverly tells him with a roll of her eyes. "Honestly, I love you to death, but you're dense as a pile of bricks sometimes."

"I don't deny that it's a huge honor, but it's not like he's giving me the stables to run," Will says. Beverly huffs, folding her arms on the top edge of Pergalė's stall door, and fixes him with an unimpressed look. "He wants me to show Red when the time comes. I told him I didn't know how shows even go like, so he offered to teach me. Not a big deal."

"He could have asked Francis to do it," Beverly argues, and Will hides a smile because he knows exactly what Hannibal thinks of Will taking Francis' advice. That would, of course, extend to a show – though Will doesn't think Francis would even have time to teach him the ropes, given how busy he is. "Or me, even – I've been to shows before. But no, he offered to take you *himself*."

Jesus. Will's glad he didn't get a chance to tell her the rest of it – that Hannibal not only offered to take him, but see him dressed the part too. "The way you're acting, you're like one of my dogs at dinner time," Will says, and straightens again, deeming the stall finished. He moves out of the stall and Beverly catches his arm. He pauses, and she frowns, taking in a deep breath.

"What's that smell?" she asks.

"Oh," Will turns his head, breathing in at his shoulder. The scent of Hannibal's salve is strong, sharper with his sweat. "He gave me some of his muscle relaxants, I think. To help me until I get used to the workout."

Beverly drops her hand, and fixes Will with an almost pitying look. "Oh, Will, you big, dumb, beautiful bastard."

"*What*?" Will demands.

She claps her hands together, fixes her fingers to her mouth, and lifts her eyes up. "Look, I'm going to say this once, and only once, and maybe it'll get through all that hair to your brain," she says, and Will glares at her. "I know this is the only stable you've worked at, but owners don't just give stable hands their personal salves and invite them to shows, Will. This is a competitive place, and Hannibal has a reputation of turning out champions and has the best trainers on the East Coast. He's not just doing all this out of…curiosity."

"You're right," Will tells her with a huff. "He's doing it because the Vergers are a high-profile client, Francis' plate is too full, and for some reason he thinks I would be a good fit for Red." Which he is, there's no denying that. He doesn't think Francis' style would jive well with Red's personality at all – Red requires patience, and a lot of wiggle room, and the mindset to allow him to have some fun.

Beverly rolls her eyes and shakes her head.

"Are you going to actually use your words, or can I get back to work?" Will says.

"Oh my God, *fine*, fine, alright," Beverly says, following Will to the closet where they keep the rakes and forks. Will puts the one he was using back and runs a hand through his hair, fixing her with another look. "I will absolutely kill you if you tell anyone I told you this, and I'm only telling you this because you're my friend and also a stubborn jerk, *but*…" Will arches a brow. "Hannibal…plays for both teams, if you catch my drift."

Will blinks at her. "And?"

"*And*," Beverly adds, earnest and eager; "I'm pretty sure he likes the look of you for the draft, if you get my meaning."

Will blinks at her again, and flushes immediately. "Meaning gotten," he bites out, and isn't sure where this sudden hostility is coming from. The discomfort he's feeling isn't for the idea, certainly – after Will left home he learned to accept that he, too, likes both men and women and isn't shy about it, though his attempts to seek out companionship are few and far between. Not because of shame, but simply because he normally finds other people exhausting to be around, and knows enough about himself to know he's hardly dating material, no matter which 'team' he's playing for.

"So, I'm just saying, he's paying attention to you, Will. He doesn't really pay attention to people he doesn't find interesting."

"Look," Will growls, and holds up a hand, "let's forget for a moment that this is an incredibly inappropriate thing to talk about, because it's neither of our Goddamn business if Hannibal is fucking a guy or a girl, he's my *boss*. And he's hardly given me the time of day before, *and* I'm pretty sure he doesn't want to."

"Mhm," Beverly says, and raises her eyebrows. "And why do you think that is?"

"Look, Bev, at best this is going to make things really awkward between us, and like I said, Hannibal is my boss. I don't need you putting ideas in my head."

"I'm not trying to do that, Will," she replies, and seems a little cowed by his reaction. She presses her lips together and sighs through her nose. "I just…don't want you to be surprised. I've known Hannibal a long time, longer than you've worked here, and I'm just saying this is out of character for him. Maybe you're right!" she adds, holding up her hands before Will can respond. "Maybe he just wants to see what will happen, and thinks you'll be a good trainer, and that's that. But if it's *more* than that…"

"Then I'll find out for my damn self," Will snaps. "And it'll still be none of your business."

Beverly snorts, rolling her eyes again. "Protest too much, much?" she mutters, and Will glares at her, before he grabs another fork, and a lead rein with a halter, and starts towards Red's stall. "Alright, damn, I'm sorry I made you all…raised-hackle-y. I'll shut up about it. I'm just trying to look out for you."

"I'm a big boy, I can take care of myself," Will says quietly.

He steps into Red's stall and smiles when the stallion perks up, whinnying softly in greeting. It's mid-morning, and Will can see the now-familiar tremble of Red's legs, the heave of his belly and the flare of his nostrils. He wants to run.

"Soon, big guy," Will promises, and puts the halter on him, leading him out of the stall and securing the lead rope so Red can stand while Will mucks out the stall. He brings the wheelbarrow over and sets it just inside so he can scoop up everything that needs to be cleared away.

Red whinnies again, sharply, and Will looks up, poking his head out as he sees Mischa and Hannibal enter the stables. Mischa is astride her mare, Hannibal on one of the other horses the Lecter stable actually owns – a tall, sweet-natured gelding that is entirely black. His cheeks are flushed, hair plastered to his forehead from sweat, and they're both dressed in matching riding jackets, cream-coloring leggings, and black shining boots that go to their knees.

Beverly grins, and Will rolls his eyes, and ignores her.

"Will!" Mischa calls, and Will turns his attention to her. "Is Pergalė's stall good?"

"Yes, Miss Lecter, I just finished," Will replies. She grins at him, and slides down from Pergalė's saddle, taking her reins in hand and leading her into the stall, closing it behind her. Hannibal waits until the door is closed, giving him enough room to pass, and he dismounts the gelding, tying him to the opposite stall bars.

He walks over, and Beverly rocks in place. "Good morning, Miss Katz, Will," he says with a cordial nod of greeting.

"Mornin', boss!" Beverly says with a lazy salute.

Hannibal smiles at her, and then his dark eyes slide over to Will. They rake over him, and Will flushes again, in a way that has nothing to do with the warmth in the stables or his

physical exertion. "You seem to be moving better," he notes, and it takes all of Will's might not to glare at Beverly as she grins at him.

"Yes," Will replies, straightening up. It would be rude to keep working when Hannibal is addressing him. "Worked like a charm. Thank you."

Hannibal nods again. "Are you going to take Red out, today?"

"Soon as I'm finished here."

Hannibal tilts his head. "I would like to see how he behaves with company," he says. Will blinks at him, and swallows. "Mister Gideon took the day off, so there is another horse we need to exercise. I'd like you to join me, when you're finished here."

"Oh," Will breathes, watching as Hannibal's eyes flash with amusement, his cheeks bulging in that not-smile he does. A shiver runs down his spine, and he presses his lips together, nodding. "Of course, Sir. I can be ready in twenty."

"Excellent," Hannibal purrs, and turns away from him, leaving Will to process the idea of going on a ride *with* Hannibal. He bites his lower lip, hard, and forces himself to focus on his work since Hannibal's attention is no longer on him.

"Miss Katz, there are a few things I would like to discuss. Walk with me," Hannibal says, and goes back to the gelding, untying him. Beverly grins at Will, Will can feel it even though he doesn't look at her, and he hears her jogging to catch up, and they both walk out of the stables together.

Will finishes quickly, and puts Red back in his stall while he empties the wheelbarrow and gathers a bridle and saddle. As he passes Pergalė's stall, Mischa emerges, and grins brightly at him.

"Have a good ride!" she says, and pats Will's shoulder. She walks with Will to Red's stall and smiles at the stallion as Will goes inside, tacking him up. "He really is a beauty. How does he ride?"

"Like a cloud," Will replies, smiling. Despite everything, he's excited to take Red out again – some part of him that glimmers gently likes the idea of showing Red off. Red is the kind of animal that should be watched.

He ignores the voice in his head that sounds like Beverly, telling him Hannibal might not just be watching Red, while they ride.

Mischa smiles, and nods. "Good luck, Will," she says, and it sounds like she's wishing him good fortune for more than just a simple hack. Will's stomach clenches, half eagerness, half sharp anticipation, and she walks away. Will finishes tacking Red up and leads him to the mounting block, climbing on with a grunt.

Red tosses his head, prancing in place, and Will walks him out of the stables.

Hannibal emerges from behind them, from the second set of stalls, astride a paint mare. She is smaller than Red – though really, every horse is smaller than Red – and has mismatched eyes that seem bright with mischief. Red's ears perk up, he shakes out his mane and snorts, stretching out his neck to touch his muzzle to hers.

"Is she new?" Will asks, and nods to the mare, ignoring the way Hannibal's hands are strong and firm on the reins, doesn't pay attention to the spread of his thighs, the perfectly-straight set of his spine and shoulders.

Hannibal smiles at him. "Relatively," he says. "She was trained in the Western style; I am tasked to see if we can refine her somewhat."

"She has a dancer's gait," Will notes.

"Yes," Hannibal says, soft with pleasure, "I thought so, too."

"Don't take this as a challenge, but I don't know if she'll be able to keep up."

Hannibal laughs, loud and light, and Will blinks, because he doesn't think he's actually heard Hannibal laugh that freely before. It's a pleasant sound, and warms him like watching his dogs play warms him; a soft, affectionate flicker in his chest. He clamps his teeth together and looks away before it can show on his face.

"I suppose we'll have to see," Hannibal says, and hands Will a helmet. Will takes it, fastening it, as Hannibal buckles the chin strap beneath his own. "Lead the way, Will."

Will blushes, smiling, for the way Hannibal speaks feels the same, an echo, of the warmth in Will's chest. He gathers the reins and Red whinnies sharply, and Will feels the power and energy in him coil, ready to be released.

"I changed my mind," Will says with a grin. "Try and keep up."

Hannibal laughs again, and Will lets Red's reins go slack enough to run, digs in with his heels and rises in the saddle, and Red blusters, snorts, bucks a pace, and then Will angles him towards the trees separating stable from fields, and lets him fly.

Chapter 6

Will tries to get Red to actually slow down as they approach the first fence, knowing the big, overconfident beast has no problem flinging himself over any and all obstacles Will puts in front of him. He manages to slow Red to a canter for a few strides, but as soon as Hannibal catches up on his mare, Red whinnies loudly, throws his head up and rears mid-stride, and it's only because Will was already sitting deep in the saddle to persuade him to slow that he manages to keep his seat.

He doesn't have the coordination to recover and pull on Red's reins, no instinct to veer him one way or another, so he must simply let Red run, gathering speed and clearing the first jump. He tells himself, if Hannibal asks, he wanted to give Hannibal an example of how Red handles them – his confidence, his form, since Will cannot see it when riding him.

Red lands with a heavy thud, blustering as Will sits heavy on him again, tightens his hands and slides them up the reins so his fists rest high on his neck, in line with Red's eyes. He tugs on the reins, forcing Red's mouth taut at the corners from the bit, makes him raise his head which naturally slows a horse down. When Red whinnies, tossing his head, tail raised high, Will digs in with one heel and pulls the reins down to that knee, making Red circle, slowing further – to a strict-short canter, then a trot.

Finally, a walk.

Will sighs, petting Red's shoulder in reward and scratching below his withers, when he becomes aware of hoofbeats, quickly gaining volume. Both he and Red look up in time to see Hannibal sailing over the fence, the mare's feet tucked tight to her chest, her ears forward and nostrils flared as they clear it. She kicks up her heels, landing gracefully. Hannibal brings her to a sharp halt, lets her billow and rear up to compensate.

His expression is smooth, focused, but when he looks at Will, Will can tell he's enjoying himself.

"Try to keep up," Hannibal calls to him, and then nudges the mare with his heels, lets her reins go long – she was a barrel racer, Will would bet money on it – and lets her fly.

Will is, for a moment, too stunned to do anything – just watch Hannibal as he rides away, lifted from the saddle to let his mare gallop, still straight-backed, heels down, perfect posture, his hands broad and firm around her reins.

Then Red neighs, as though reminding him he's still there, and huffs impatiently. Will grins, gathers his reins, and lifts up. "Come on, big guy," he says, and clicks his tongue. Red snorts, and lunges into a fierce gallop, his strides stretching long as he tries to overtake the mare. Or maybe he just wants to chase her – Will can admit, there's something exhilarating about running after Hannibal like this, watching the distance get eaten by Red's huge, powerful strides.

The mare clears the second fence and Red is just two strides behind her – Will pulls him back, makes his second two shorter so that there's enough space, so Red doesn't bounce like he did in the ring. Red, it seems, is more amenable to suggestion this time around, because he lets Will pull him up short with little protest, clears the next gate, and blusters in thanks when Will lets him run as he likes again.

They catch up – Will puts Red on Hannibal's left, a few meters away so that neither horse can bother the other. He looks over, finds Hannibal's face split into a wide, fond smile – close-lipped, but he might as well be laughing with delight for how bright his eyes are shining beneath the rim of his helmet.

Will tugs on the reins when Red tries to overtake, shushes him and pets his shoulder when Red whinnies. "Steady," he coaxes. Red's gallops is as comfortable as his canter – Will thinks he would be just as comfortable fully-seated, as he is, lifted from the saddle. It's best to be more above a horse's shoulders when at speed, to keep their center of gravity where they're strongest.

Red seems to understand – he is no longer flying at full speed, but matches his strides in length to that of the mare, who is doing her very best to keep up, but Will can see she's getting tired. Barrel racers are used to going full-tilt, but they must be able to stop on a dime, and don't have the endurance of steeplechasers or cross-country-trained animals.

They're approaching the third fence, and Hannibal suddenly pulls back, slowing his mare to a canter. It takes Will a moment to catch up, but he does the same, sitting deep in the saddle and bringing Red around with a sudden tug to the left of him, away from Hannibal and his mare. Red whinnies, but allows it, tossing his head as Will brings the reins in a wide triangle, shushing him again as he slows, his gait shortening and falling into the three-beat step of a canter. Red blows out a heavy breath, his sides expanding wide, and blusters as Will takes him in a wide circle, turning him away from the fence and the gate, and back towards Hannibal.

Hannibal has brought his mare to a halt, and she stands in a perfect rectangle, weight on all feet, as Hannibal pets over her mane and scratches beneath it. Her forelegs are quivering finely, her delicate nostrils flared as she lowers her head, lashes and ears low and relaxed.

"She was getting tired," Hannibal tells him, almost apologetic. Will nods in acceptance, brings Red to a halt at an angle to Hannibal and his mare, and she whinnies sharply, shaking out her mane. "You were right – he has an almost flawless jumping form, very little wasted in terms of position, but we must teach him to save his strength."

Will nods again. "Mischa and I agreed that we need to get more strength in his forelegs, to even him out," he says, and Hannibal hums, raking his eyes up and down Red as the stallion bobs his chin, chewing lazily at the bit. He doesn't try and graze, which Will is glad for – he knows when he's working, and he knows when he's allowed to do as he pleases. "I don't… really know how to do that."

Hannibal's head tilts. "Working a horse downhill helps with forelegs and shoulders," he says, and turns his head away, eyeing the field. It is on a small slope – nothing drastic, rising at the back where the trees are and dipping down to where there is a walking path, and a road. A

single car passes by, as they watch. "I would recommend taking him at speed down hills, and walking him back up them. That will help, as will adding weights to the front of his saddle, or around his ankles."

Will nods, filing that information away, and wonders if Hannibal would have argued if he'd said Francis had recommended the same. He decides not to test it – Hannibal's regard, his friendship, is a new thing, and Will doesn't want to go out of his way to displease him.

Hannibal looks back to him again, and shakes his head, sighing in something almost disappointed. "You are still slouching," he says. Will straightens immediately, flushing, and notes how Red shifts his weight to compensate for Will's changed position.

Hannibal smiles. "There. Much better. Your shoulders and back will thank you for it."

Will huffs a laugh. "Mucking out stalls all day kind of gives you a perma-hunch. I'll work on it." Hannibal hums, and with a flick of his wrist, his mare perks up, and begins to walk. Will turns Red, puts him at Hannibal's side, both horses walking leisurely back towards the fence, towards the stables.

Will nods to the mare. "What's her name?"

"Olivia," Hannibal replies. "She has a comfortable gait, and she's very responsive." He smiles down at the mare, gives her shoulder an affectionate pat. "I quite like her. I think we could make a fine dressage animal from her – or perhaps a mount for children. She'd make a good animal for beginners."

"Children?" Will asks, brows rising. The Lecter stables don't offer anything like summer camps or day-long sessions for teens and kids, suited only to the upper class and the animals they already own. Hannibal nods.

"Mischa suggested it," he says. "A lot of our clients have children, and I am a firm believer that the young are easier to teach that those who think they know better." He gives Will a conspiratorial smile. "How are we to find the next generation of champions if we only let the seasoned veterans have their turn?"

Will laughs. "I agree," he replies. "But you'll need more than one horse if you intend to open up camps."

"Well, perhaps between the three of us, we will find some suitable mounts."

Will pauses, pressing his lips together. "Three?" he repeats.

"You, Mischa, and myself. You have a good eye for an animal's constitution, Will, and their temperament." Will blushes, looking forward, his hands flexing where they rest, loose, on his thighs. "I think, if all goes well, I would like your opinion on any in-home acquisitions."

Will blinks. "I'm…honored, Sir. Thank you."

"Please, Will, I insist you call me Hannibal. At least when it's just the two of us."

Will's blush darkens, a flutter of warmth in his chest that has nothing to do with the sun or exercise rising up in him. "Okay, Hannibal. Sorry – force of habit."

Hannibal nods. "You were raised in the South, yes?" Will nods again. "What made you venture up this way?"

"My dad's family sold our farm, and he wanted to use the money to travel. I was with him for a while, when he was up here, but I missed the horses, and I made a few calls, but no one was hiring back home. Then Bev told me about this place."

Hannibal accepts that with a soft hum. There is a small period of silence, then Will chances; "And you? Your family's not from here."

"What gave me away?" Hannibal asks, and grins when Will laughs, sheepish, and rubs his hand over the back of his neck. "Mischa and I were fortunate enough to have a large inheritance. When I was old enough, I moved to France with my uncle, and one summer he took me to Austria. Vienna is famous for their Lipizzaner stallions, and he took me to one of their shows, and I suppose I fell in love. I ended up staying with the troupe for a year, learning all I could, and then summers after that. When I was sure I knew enough about the business, and the animals, to make it on my own, I bought these stables, and filled them with my champions."

"A self-made man," Will says with a smile.

"I suppose – a self-man made with the privilege of opportunity, money, and good teachers," Hannibal replies, and meets Will's smile. They ride to the gate and Will keeps Red back, away from it, as Hannibal guides Olivia to the latch and swings it open. It lets out that familiar, awful creak, and Hannibal's mouth turns down at the corners. "I see what you meant – quite an unpleasant noise."

Will nods, petting Red's neck, glad that he's far enough back that he doesn't shy from the noise. Or maybe he's trying not to look scared in the presence of a pretty girl. Will smirks to himself at the thought, and guides Red through the gate once it's open. He waits until Hannibal closes and latches the gate, and they begin to walk again.

"Did you always want to be a stable owner, then?" he asks, when the silence stretches on past companionable to a little tense, a little awkward. Will has never minded silences – craves it, in fact – but Hannibal is an undoubtedly interesting person, and this kind of opportunity doesn't come along very often. Who knows when they'll be able to just talk again.

Hannibal shakes his head. "I wanted to be a surgeon," he says. "Or something to do with medicine. For a while I did study at a French hospital, and between summers in Austria I would work there and learn what I could. I can't deny it's been helpful, though."

Will nods. "That salve you gave me worked like a charm."

Hannibal smiles at him. "I'm glad," he murmurs. "I keep my stores in my office – feel free to help yourself to them, should you run out."

"Thank you, Hannibal," Will replies softly, moved by the offer. Hannibal's office, that big house, still seems like the sort of place you're only supposed to enter by invitation. An open one such as that is a big honor.

Like it was just waiting to strike, Beverly's words hit him like a cobra, sinking its fangs into Will's head. He shivers, and shakes it off.

"I think it will be beneficial to begin putting Red through courses, once he's more balanced," Hannibal notes, either not noticing or ignoring Will's sudden shift in mood. Will blinks, refocusing, and looks to him as Hannibal smiles, and nods to the stallion. "He has a lot of spirit, and seems fearless enough. I will have Gideon construct a puissance course in one of the inside rings, for you to practice."

"Great."

"The first competition on the docket is in two weeks," Hannibal adds. Will sucks in a breath, forces himself not to tense so that Red doesn't feel it, and looks at him with wide eyes. "I realize that's not a lot of time."

"Well, if Red's my only charge, I see no reason why we can't try," Will says, with more confidence than he feels. It's his own feeling of inadequacy rising up, he knows that – but Hannibal has faith in Will, and Will has faith in Red, and he thinks he can get Red to understand things like slowing down and holding back – he has the size to clear most jumps easily. It's just making sure, at the end, he has the strength and energy to go for the seven-footers that will be the goal.

Hannibal smiles brightly, obviously pleased by Will's eagerness. It shows his teeth and makes his eyes flash, and Will swallows, looking away. He bites his lip so he doesn't say anything stupid, or make promises that he can't keep.

They go through the second gate, and the path through the forest is narrow, forcing Will's and Hannibal's stirrups to brush as the horses walk side by side. When they emerge, Will and Hannibal halt, watching Francis riding the same dapple mare through her paces in the ring with the jumping course.

Will watches Hannibal out of the corner of his eye, seeing Hannibal eyeing Francis thoughtfully, his lips pursed and his eyes dark. He doesn't seem displeased, exactly – but he watches Francis and the mare with the same shrewd look Will imagines a butcher might eye meat, deciding which pieces to sell and which to discard.

Hannibal hums to himself, and flicks his wrist, urging his mare on. "Brush down Red and come meet me in my office," he says, before he turns away, walking his mare towards the second clutch of stalls. Will nods, wondering what Hannibal might possibly want to talk to him about, since he was under the impression that his sole responsibility will be training Red on top of his normal duties, and the day is still young enough to work him through his paces.

But he obeys, dismounting and grunting in discomfort, his thighs and shoulders sore. He walks Red into his stall, untacks him and brushes him down, and makes sure he has water and haylage aplenty.

He pets Red's cheek and gives him a mint, smiling when the horse snorts onto his hand and takes it, crunching noisily. "Two weeks, big guy," he says quietly, scratching under Red's forelock. "Think you have it in you?"

Red blinks at him, like this is a stupid question.

Will smiles. "Yeah, I think so too."

He puts the saddle and bridle back and dusts his hands off, wetting them in a nearby trough of water, and runs his hands through his hair to try and calm it from the sweaty mess it had taken beneath his helmet. Then, he goes to the house, and lets himself inside.

Hannibal's office door is open, and the man is pouring himself a glass of water. He looks up when Will enters, and offers it to him, and Will takes it eagerly, drinking half of it down as Hannibal pours himself another. Will refills his, and they sit in those comfortable, thickly-padded chairs.

Hannibal sighs, rubbing absently at the line across his forehead where the elastic of the helmet sat. It's strangely endearing to see – Will didn't think Hannibal the kind of person to tolerate marks and dips of labor on his skin. His cheeks are flushed from the warmth and exercise, and it makes his eyes seem darker, black in the low light.

Hannibal takes a long drink of water, sighing again, and purses his lips, his eyes somewhere over Will's shoulder. "Who would you recommend take over your duties, while you train Red?" he asks.

Will blinks at him, and frowns. "What do you mean?"

"Tending to the stalls is a full-time job, Will – at least, it's what I have been paying you to fill your time doing. I imagine adding to that a rigorous training process would be exhausting, and I have no intention of running you into the ground."

Will flushes, and isn't sure if he's more pleased at Hannibal's conscientiousness, or insulted by the implication that he can't handle it all. "I can still do it," he replies, somewhat sharply. That earns him Hannibal's eyes, an amused tilt of his mouth, raised brows.

His head tilts in consideration. "You're possessive of your duties," he notes.

"I'm good at what I do," Will replies. "I know everyone you hire is good at what they do, otherwise they wouldn't still be here, doing it."

"Are you worried you will forget how to sweep and rake?"

Will winces, but he refuses to be cowed. "The horses know me," he says quietly, thumbing the rim of his glass. He takes another drink, glad for the coolness of the water. "I guess if you want to use the word, I'm possessive of them."

Hannibal's brows rise again. "Tell me, Will – when you are indisposed, who cares for your dogs?"

"I make sure I'm never indisposed," Will says.

Hannibal hums. "The life of a showman may take you far away, for a long time. Puissance courses are one-day events, but what if Red shows an aptitude for three-day events? Or races? I'm sure you would want to ride him for those. So, who would tend to your dogs?"

Will winces again. He sucks in a breath through his teeth. "I don't know," he admits. He doesn't have a lot of friends, even fewer he would trust to make sure his dogs got the right amount of food and exercise. "I guess I'd ask Bev, first. If she couldn't do it, I'd…put them up."

"So you see my point," Hannibal replies in a reasonable tone, spreading his free hand out in a helpless gesture. "I'm not asking you to discard your charges, Will, or to ignore them entirely. I'm simply asking who you think would be best-suited to help you, while you focus on other things."

Will frowns down at his water. He bites his lower lip and shrugs, wincing again when his muscles strain and pull. "I guess Jesse, then. Or Gideon, if he has the time."

Hannibal nods. "Thank you, Will," he says, and his voice sounds…softer. More affectionate. When Will meets his eyes, and he finds Hannibal's gaze oddly sympathetic. "You and I are similar in nature – we like to be aware of everything, and find the thought of someone else taking over something we are perfectly capable of handling an uncomfortable one. But that is the role of leaders – to delegate, and manage from afar."

Will's frown deepens. "I…" He pauses, and runs a hand over the back of his neck, wincing again as sore muscles ache and throb beneath his fingers. Hannibal's eyes flash, and he sighs, setting his water down, and standing.

"You really have a terrible form when you're riding," he notes, and circles Will's chair. Will goes still, watching from the corner of his eye, and then Hannibal moves out of sight. "You slouch like a cowboy watching his herd. Puissance requires ultimate control, over both yourself, and your animal. Sit up straight."

Will obeys, and tenses further when Hannibal's hands land on his shoulders. His touch is strong, and firm, and Will doesn't know what to do with himself. He wraps both hands around his water glass, sucking in a breath as Hannibal's thumbs dig in on either side of his spine. Will can feel the knots shift beneath Hannibal's hands, and he groans when Hannibal presses down, forcing his shoulders to slacken and lower.

"When you are riding, Will, you must imagine there is a string going through the top of your head, down your spine," Hannibal says. He's so close, his voice low; it makes goose bumps break out on Will's neck, and he shivers, bowing his head as Hannibal's thumbs slide up to his nape, spread out wide down the sides of his throat. He tugs, making Will right himself again. "It is pulling you upright, always, even when Red is galloping, even when you are jumping. The higher you allow yourself to be pulled, the easier it will be for him as well."

"The Austrians teach you that?" Will asks, and doesn't know why he's so breathless. His shoulders hurt, as Hannibal drags his thumbs beneath the blades, unyielding in their strength

as he grips Will's shoulders and digs in, forcing the knots to give and melt away.

Hannibal huffs a laugh. "I learned the hard way," he replies, "when I was still young enough to think I knew everything."

Will rolls his eyes.

"You'd be surprised how much can change with so little effort," Hannibal murmurs, and Will groans, lashes fluttering as Hannibal finds another hard cluster of knots, lower on his back. He arches into the touch, fingers shaking and clenching tight around his water as he feels his muscles twitch and shiver, yielding to Hannibal's relentless pressure.

Hannibal's hands still, just for a moment, but with Will so keyed into him, he notices. He swallows so that he doesn't make a sound. Hannibal resumes, again, after another moment of thick silence. "You should try sleeping on your back," he says. "One of your shoulders is in much worse shape than the other – do you sleep on your right side?"

Will shakes his head. "I, ah, got stabbed in the shoulder, when I was in my twenties," he says. Hannibal pauses again. "It locks up a lot. Doesn't stop me moving, but there's knots there I don't think I'll ever get out."

Hannibal lets out a curious sound, and gentles his hands somewhat, but doesn't stop. He cups Will's right shoulder, presses with his left palm and right thumb, trapping the big knot right below where the scar tissue ends.

Will hisses, and sets his water down so he doesn't break the glass, pressing his fist to the arm of the chair. "*Fuck*."

Hannibal hums, circling his thumb, easing the pressure up until it starts to burn, and Will is trembling, breathing hard through the pain, his fingers flexing and then curling until his knuckles turn white. He groans, when the knot holds firm, and Hannibal tuts, but must take it as a challenge, because he doesn't stop.

Until, suddenly, a give so powerful Will gasps, sagging, and Hannibal's thumb can move all the way up the scar on his shoulder without the knot to stop him. Hannibal sighs, the sound heavy with satisfaction, and brushes his fingers back and forth along the scar and where the knot was, soothing the ache and encouraging the built-up lactic acid to move away from the site.

Will groans again, panting as Hannibal makes another quiet, satisfied noise, and pulls his hands away with one last lingering brush over Will's shoulders and neck. Will lifts his head, breathing heavily, trembling as Hannibal circles back to his seat and takes his glass in hand, drinking some more water. He sets the glass down again and rubs his hands together, uncharacteristically fidgety.

Will rolls his shoulder, sighing when he finds it's still stiff, but feels much, much better than it did. "Thank you," he murmurs. His back burns, his neck feels like it's on fire, but he knows he can't pin all of that on the strain of so much tension being suddenly released.

Hannibal meets his eyes, and Will sucks in a breath. No, he can't blame that at all.

Hannibal smiles at him. "Don't ruin my hard work," he says, with that same playful look he'd given Will on their ride. "You're very sensitive, and responsive – that's good." Will blinks at him, and blushes deeply, looking down. "It will make you a good rider for Red – to be able to tune into the way he moves, and what he's thinking. I cannot teach that. But your inexperience will make you more susceptible to unnecessary aches and pains."

Will nods, unable to say anything else. Christ, he feels like he's burning.

"I will have Jesse take over your normal tasks, starting tomorrow. You may continue attending to Red, and Pergalė, since I doubt she will be friendly towards him, but as of tomorrow, you are a trainer, Will – your job is to train."

Will nods, flexing his fingers. "Yes, Sir," he says. He looks up, finds Hannibal watching him with fond amusement. "Sorry – Hannibal."

"Good," Hannibal purrs, and turns away. "That will be all."

Will stands, finishes his water, and puts the glass back on the tray, before he takes his leave. He's jittery, and his hands are shaking, and for lack of anything better to do, he goes back to Red, and brings with him a bucket of water and a wet brush. Red snorts at him, ears perked up, and noses at Will's shoulder.

Will smiles at him. "Real work starts tomorrow, big guy," he murmurs. Red whinnies, shaking out his mane, and shifts his weight so one of his back legs is bent, standing at rest. Will sighs, needing to do *something*, and so he brushes Red to a lovely sheen, washes and bathes him until there's not a speck of dust on him, and when he goes home that night, all of his dogs dance with him until none of them can stand, and they collapse on their respective beds. It's the most restful sleep Will can ever remember having.

Chapter 7

When Will wakes up, his shoulder is tense and tight and it hurts to move. He understands why – the aftereffects of a massage, no matter how gentle, break up lactic acid gathered in the knots and means he will be sore for a while. He hisses, stretches his arm in front of him until his shoulder pops, and reaches for the salve Hannibal gave him, coating his fingers and rubbing the salve into his shoulder until the tingling numbness takes over.

He rises and feeds his dogs, smiling as he lets them out and watches them barrel over each other to find a good space to mark. Winston remains at his side, as always, more inclined to sit next to Will and watch the pack after he does his own business.

Will pets over his soft head, scratches his ear absently, and Winston yawns widely, licking his jaws and huffing through his nose. Will looks down at him, and sighs, tugging on his ear until Winston rolls onto his side, head tilting to look up at Will, his tail thumping gently against the porch, mouth open so his tongue lolls out.

Today begins his life as a trainer. Will hasn't had to be one-on-one with a horse for many years, and even when he was a kid, most of his interaction with the horses his father owned was under the man's supervision, or with the company of his cousins, who were much more versed in the ways of horsemanship.

He smiles, wondering what Hannibal might think if he were to ever watch them, as they had been, chasing each other on horseback, sitting low in their big Western-style saddles, kicking up mud and laughing at every near-collision. At least Will knows how to fall properly.

He's not nervous – no, whatever he feels in terms of his own inadequacy, it's not for his ability to keep his seat. And he trusts Red, and Red trusts him. They just have to get used to this new environment, and make sure to pay attention to each other.

He calls his dogs back and locks up, before he gets in his car and drives to the Lecter stables. The morning is bright and clear and when he enters the stalls, he finds Jesse already at work, cleaning out the ones that have been used overnight – there are significantly fewer than when Will was doing it, since most people have taken their animals out.

Jesse lifts his head and gives Will a small wave, smiling at him. Will smiles back, and checks on Red, finds the stallion munching lazily on his net of haylage, ears low and flopping to the side, weight shifted so he's resting on three legs.

Red perks up, when he sees Will, and snorts in greeting. "Hey, big guy," Will says with a smile, and reaches out with a curled hand, that Red sniffs curiously, lips at, and then ignores once he realizes Will isn't going to offer him a mint. Will's smile widens, and he turns away, heading towards the tack room.

"Will!" Jesse says, and Will pauses, a hand on Red's saddle. Jesse comes up to him and gestures to one of the shelves. "Mister Lecter told me to tell you about these." He reaches out and takes down a pair of guards, which are made to wrap around a horse's lower legs to

prevent them injuring themselves too badly should they knock a jump. Will takes them, huffing in surprise when he finds them very heavy. "He said you should use them today."

Will nods, remembering Hannibal's suggestion for using weights on Red's forelegs. "Thanks," he says, and tucks them into his waistband, before he sets the bridle over the saddle and hoists it into his arms, going back to Red.

Red snorts at him again, head lifting in readiness as Will sets the saddle down. He enters the stall, dusting off his hands, and smiles when Red whinnies, tail swishing in excitement, ears forward and attentive. He takes the bit a lot more readily, working his jaws until the bit settles behind his teeth, and Will can pull the ear straps up and work his ears and forelock between the leather.

Will puts the saddle on him, next, his reins dropping to the floor, and tightens the girth strap, and then he takes the weighted ankle boots. He brushes his hand down Red's left shoulder, behind his knee, and waits until his weight gives before he crouches, fastening the soft neoprene around Red's leg. They stretch up to half-way up his leg, and wrap below his ankle, and that is where the weights are – Will can feel the bulge of them against his palm as he pulls the Velcro tight and pulls the waterproof covering over the fastenings, to make sure they don't come apart or catch on anything.

He does the same with Red's right foreleg, and straightens, taking Red's reins as Red snorts, blustering, shifting his weight. He paws at the ground – not in threat or agitation, but testing the weight – and gives Will an accusatory look.

"Gotta get your strength up, buddy," Will says with a smile, scratching beneath his mane, and Red snorts at him again. "Yeah, I know. Come on, you monster."

He leads Red out of the stall and to the mounting block, swinging himself into the saddle, hissing under his breath when his sore shoulder twinges softly in protest. He forces his shoulders to go low, straightens up as Hannibal told him – imagines a string, tugging his spine straight, making him lift his head. He walks Red towards the stall doors and grabs a helmet on his way, fastening the strap beneath his chin as they emerge into the dawning light.

Red turns towards the path immediately, knowing by now where Will intends to lead him, and Will smiles, nudges him into a canter, and rides towards the trees. He can feel how Red's forelegs hesitate, heavier now with the weights on him – though they aren't particularly cumbersome, and Will is sure no extra burden than Will himself is, he understands that it must feel strange to Red, to have to work that much harder to get his legs to move.

He keeps the pace slow, his deep seat letting him more easily ride Red through a gentle canter, until they reach the first field. He doesn't direct Red towards the gate or fence, but leads him up the hill, pushed forward so as much of his weight is on Red's front as possible, and slows him on the decline, letting him rest.

He does this for hours, losing himself in the routine of rushing Red up the gentle slope and walking him back down it. Red, it seems, gets the idea after a while, and soon Will doesn't even have to pull on his reins or dig in his heels to get him to slow or quicken, respectively.

Will smiles, glad that Red is so intelligent, to pick up on patterns and attune himself to Will so well. He really is a wonderful ride, and such a different animal than the mean, showy guy Will had first met.

He runs Red up the hill at a full gallop, one last time, and pulls him up short as Red whinnies, rearing up to compensate for the abrupt slowing of his pace. His head tosses, and Will laughs, turning him down the slope again. Red snorts at him, puts his head down and kicks out, tosses his head up high again as Will lets him prance, circling him wide in the open field.

Then, he turns Red towards the fence.

"Come on," he urges, and gathers his reins, lifts in the stirrups. Red surges forward with an excited huff, sprints full-speed towards the fence, and Will laughs as he sails over it, easy as anything. He lands heavier than normal, the weights on his forelegs making him bring them up high to compensate, and Will digs in with his heels, grips with his knees tight to the saddle, and urges him on.

They jump the second fence, and Red is panting, but seems eager to go on. The third one is cleared easily, and Will turns him up the hill again at full tilt, Red kicking up mud and grass as his hooves drive into the ground, every inch of him surging with power, the freedom of just being allowed to *run*.

It's exhilarating, and Will brings his reins tight, so he has the best control over Red's mouth, zigs and zags him up the hill so the 'uphill' part takes as long as possible. When they reach the top, he slows Red to a halt, lets his reins get long, and Red blusters and shakes out his sweaty mane.

Will is sweating, too, every muscle in him burning from the exercise, his cheeks flushed and hair pressed flat to his forehead beneath the helmet. He shifts the rim of it, lifting it so he can push his hair away, and wipes the sweat from his brow as Red trembles.

Will pets over his shoulder, sighing heavily. "Good job, buddy," he murmurs, and Red huffs. Will tilts his head, lifts his eyes. They're alone out here.

Will dismounts, grunting when his sore legs hit the ground, and it takes a moment to convince his thighs and knees to hold his weight. Red looks at him, ears canted Will's way, and Will smiles, and lets his reins go loose, runs them over his head so he's holding them in front of Red, and stands by his head.

He clicks his tongue, smiling when Red looks at him and bobs his chin. He reaches out, and gently gathers Red's reins until he can bunch them up beneath his chin. He pushes his shoulder to Red's muzzle, and reaches with his free hand, and holds him by the knee.

Red snorts, steps back. Will steps forward until he can do it again, and Red snorts again. It would be easier to do this with a long crop, or a line, but Will is curious to see if Red even understands the command.

He pulls on Red's chin, makes him lower his head, pushes with his shoulder until Red's neck arches, high and regal and sharp. His weight shifts, putting it on the leg Will isn't holding,

and slowly, slowly, he sinks down, and bows. The foreleg Will is holding is stretched out, the other bent so his knee digs against the soft grass, his haunches raised up.

Will grins, and lets him go, and Red straightens. He looks at Will like he's asking what the point of that whole thing was, and Will smiles at him, feeds him a mint, and does it again.

Red bows more readily the second time, picking up on Will's cues, his tail swishing in interest when Will smiles, and rubs his cheek to Red's. He makes Red bow once more with this leg, and then switches sides, and does the same on the other.

This one is harder – Red prefers to lead with his left, Will figured that out during their first ride, so it's more difficult for him to put his weight on his right leg and let his left one bend, but he manages. When Will lets him up, Red lips at his shirt and gives a huff of impatience.

"Alright," Will murmurs, and lets the reins go slack again, running them over Red's head to settle on the pommel of his saddle. "Thanks for humoring me, big guy." He feeds Red another mint, playfully grimacing at the spit-slick brush of Red's muzzle as he takes it, and Will leads him over to the fence and climbs on it, so he can mount Red again. "You up for jumping home, or you wanna rest?"

Red shakes his mane out, and prances a pace, and Will grins.

"Awesome," he says, and readies himself for the sprint home. "My kinda guy."

Will slows Red to a trot as they emerge from the trees, the sun bright and almost at its peak. The air is warm, and both he and Red are soaked with sweat, breathing hard as Will slows him further. Francis is in the jumping ring, leading the dappled mare through her paces.

At one end, near the path, Will sees Hannibal standing with Margot Verger.

They both look up as he approaches, and Margot smiles widely, and looks surprised to see Will so comfortable astride Red. "My, look at him!" she crows, clapping her hands together. Red lifts his head, preening, and Will rolls his eyes internally at the display. "He has the look of a champion about him already!"

Beside her, Hannibal is smiling, his eyes dark and entire demeanor soaked with pride. "Yes, he does," he purrs, and Will flushes, because Hannibal is looking directly at Will when he says it. Hannibal nods to Red's shin guards. "How did he take the weights?"

"Like a pro," Will replies, pulling Red to a halt in front of them. "Didn't slow him down for a second."

Hannibal hums. "Margot and I were just discussing our plans to enter Red into the puissance course in two weeks," he says, and Will nods. "I wonder, do you think he has the energy to attempt the course? Gideon just completed it – it's ready."

Will blinks, and looks down at Red. His head is drooping; he's obviously tired. "I worked him pretty hard," he says, soft with apology. "But we might convince him to do a few jumps."

"Excellent," Hannibal says, and offers his arm to Margot. "Shall we?"

Margot nods, and Will walks Red behind them as they go into one of the indoor rings. It has been set up with a series of high, imposing-looking jumps all around the edge.

In the center, the pride and joy. It's a solid wall, made to look like brick, though Will knows the uppermost layers are made of soft foam so a horse or rider won't injure themselves too badly if they fall against it. Will can't help swallowing, nervous when he sees the height of it – it looks daunting as Hell, and for the first time he finds himself considering just *what* a puissance course will actually mean.

Red's head lifts, his ears forward, and he lets out a curious huff.

Hannibal directs Margot to stand outside the ring, where there is a small walkway to allow people to watch, and approaches Will. He puts a hand on Will's knee and Will stiffens, looking down at him. "You know his limits best, right now," Hannibal says, and his eyes are dark, his voice stern. "If you don't think he's ready, then I encourage you not to force him. I don't want either of you injured."

Will nods, a flash of warm anticipation in his chest. Despite Hannibal's words, he wants to try – he wants to make Red look good. Wants Hannibal to look good, by extension, for his client. He wants Hannibal to keep looking at him like that – proud, affectionate, excited.

"We'll see how he feels," Will murmurs.

Hannibal nods. "The wall is only six feet, at the moment. We'll work him up to the record when it's time."

Will nods, and Hannibal walks away from him, joining Margot in quiet conversation. Will sighs, and forces himself to settle – he won't tense up. He won't slouch. His back feels tender from riding for so long, his shoulder aches, and Red is undoubtedly tired, but he kicks up into a canter readily enough, as Will leads him around the inner circle, around the wall jump.

He stops Red, on the other side of it. Lets him take a good look. "Whatcha think, big guy?" he murmurs, petting over Red's mane. Red is a large animal, and strong, but a jump that size would be daunting for even a goliath like him.

But Red snorts, and whinnies sharply, tossing his head. Will smiles.

"Alright, if you think so," he says, and tries to channel Red's confidence. He turns him away, digs in with his heels, and leads Red towards the first set of jumps. It's a double, with enough room for a stride between. He knows, now, that Red likes to gun it and go flying, so he's ready – he lets Red gather his pace, stretches him out and pulls him up short for the first jump, smiles when he sails over it easily, takes a stride, and takes the second.

"Good job, buddy," he breathes, and pets Red's sweaty neck as Red lands hard, lets Will turn him away from the next logical jump, circling around the wall jump. Red is getting tired, Will can tell – he doesn't want to wear him out, but Red keeps angling himself towards the wall, wanting to take it on.

He leads Red to the far edge of the ring. Turns him, facing the wall jump head-on.

Breathes out. Eyes the distance – six strides, he thinks. Five, if Red really goes for it.

He looks towards Hannibal, finds him watching them intently. Margot, too, but the way she's looking at them is merely intrigued, excited to see if Red can do it. Hannibal's gaze, in comparison, burns worse than the sun does.

He breathes out again. Gathers his reins, and lifts from the saddle. Red lets out a high-pitched, eager whinny, kicks out to the side, and runs for the wall.

Six strides turn to five. Red's haunches bunch, surging forward, leaping towards the jump. Four strides. Three, two -.

Will grits his teeth, and turns him away, his shoe clipping the side of the fence as Red blusters, shaking his head sharply and veering off hard enough that Will almost loses his seat. He puts a hand on Red's shoulder, feels him quivering.

He halts Red, and dismounts.

"Everything alright?" Margot calls.

Will nods, and lifts his hand for silence. He eyes Red, finds him blinking at Will with his dark, intelligent eyes, nostrils flared wide as he tries to catch his breath. Will sighs, and puts his shoulder to Red's muzzle, smiling when Red immediately bows for him, understanding the game now.

He bends down, and undoes the shin guard, tucking it beneath the side of the wall jump. Does the same with the other, and eases his hands down Red's shaking forelegs.

"He's too tired," he calls, straightening up as Red does. He finds Hannibal watching him, head tilted, his eyes very dark with something too sharp to be intrigue. "I'm sorry, Miss Verger – I don't want to push him too hard. He needs to rest a while."

She gives an understanding nod, and doesn't look disappointed. Will doesn't want to meet Hannibal's eyes, but his gaze is drawn to the other man, magnetized. When their eyes meet, Hannibal smiles. So very wide.

"Perhaps later this afternoon, then," he says, and doesn't sound disappointed either. "Come, Margot, let's rejoin Francis outside." She nods, and takes his arm, and he leads her out of the ring.

Red snorts at him, tail swishing impatiently, and lips at Will's shoulder.

Will sighs, and cups his broad cheeks, resting their foreheads together. "I know," he says, and smiles. "I got nervous, big guy, I'm sorry."

Red blinks at him.

"You still wanna try?"

Red snorts, and Will leads him to the wall separating ring from walkway. He climbs onto it and gets back into the saddle, feeling much more relaxed without Hannibal and Margot there to watch him. Red rears up, whinnying sharply, and Will smiles, and leads him back to the end of the ring.

Six strides. Maybe five.

He lifts from the saddle, and clicks his tongue.

Red surges forward again, lunging towards the jump, and this time Will doesn't do a damn thing to stop him. Without the weights on his forelegs, Red's gallop is lighter, easier, and he runs for the wall jump. Gets so close there's no turning back.

Will tenses, but makes himself commit to it. He's got to trust Red – this is a two-way street, after all.

Red leaps. His forelegs tuck tight to his chest, his neck stretches out when Will lets it, hands high on his neck. He kicks with his back legs, and clears the jump. Will is laughing as he lands with a heavy thud, stumbling just for a second, and rears up again, whinnying like he's laughing too.

"Holy shit," Will sighs, and scratches Red's withers, as Red canters away from the jump and circles around. "Good job, buddy, holy fucking shit."

He turns Red, and looks up when he sees movement. There, at the door that leads from the walkway to the outside, Hannibal is standing.

Their eyes meet, and Hannibal smiles at him, gives him a nod, and closes the door.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will takes Red out to one of the open fields, wearing only a halter and a long rein, with the weighted boots on his forelegs. He has fashioned a makeshift set of saddlebags as well, and the straps of them sit in front of and behind Red's withers, hanging heavy down his shoulders but stopping before they turn into his forelegs.

He has a long whip-like crop as well, thin and light enough that it won't hurt Red, but will act like the twine did when they first met – a soft encouragement to keep going if Red should slow.

He lets the rein get long, stretching out several feet, so Red can run in a circle around him. He clicks his tongue, guides Red to lead with his left leg, and Red snorts, tail rising, and begins to canter in a big circle around Will. This way, Will can watch his stride, pay attention to any hesitation or weakness that he'll have to correct before the competition.

Red shines in the sunlight, a mix of russet and brown, darkening to old iron where sweat is beginning to coat his flanks, in front of his hindquarters, darkening the hair on his neck. He contemplates, idly, what they'll do for Red's mane and tail for the competition – it's popular to tie a horse's mane into a series of sharp bumps for dressage, or to simply cut off the excess so that the horse's mane is cropped short, and to bind their tail around the bone so that most of it is kept out of the way, but Will doesn't think Red would like that. He never much cared for the style, either.

He turns as Red does, making sure he never shows the stallion his back – Red likes being watched, a true showman if Will ever saw one, and though they've achieved a certain level of trust and friendliness with each other, Red is the kind of animal that knows when to behave, and will take advantage of any shift in attention, so Will has to make sure he's paying attention.

Red's canter is smooth, and even after only a few days of adding weights to his front, he's stronger there now – Will can see it as he runs, each three-beat equally strong and solid. He doesn't hesitate with his forelegs now, used to the weight.

He slows Red, turns him around, and has him run in the other direction, leading with his right.

He hears, suddenly, the squeal of the nearest gate opening. They're far enough away that it doesn't bother Red, but it catches Will's attention, and he turns to see Hannibal riding Olivia through the gate. Following him, Misha, astride Pergalė. They are both wearing those sleek black riding jackets, cream-colored leggings, tall black boots, and helmets, of course.

He gives them a nod, pressing his lips together when they smile at him. Hannibal turns to his sister, and they exchange a quiet word, before he hands Olivia's reins over to Mischa, and

dismounts. Will's fingers tighten around the rein and crop, his shoulders tense up hard enough to remind him of the solid ache in them from riding.

Hannibal walks over to him, sliding in behind Red as he makes his rounds. "Morning," Will greets.

"Good morning, Will," Hannibal replies quietly, his eyes sliding to Red. He moves with Will, standing at his shoulder, rotating like an orbiting moon so that Will can keep turning, and Red can keep running. Will smiles, reminded of how he trained Winston to dance with him. "How are you both?"

"Good," Will replies. "He's getting stronger."

Hannibal nods. He is silent, for a moment, merely watching Red as Will does.

Will swallows. "I feel like I should apologize."

"What for?"

Will's cheeks color, reminded of the show he had given Margot and Hannibal a few days prior. He hasn't seen Hannibal much since – the man, it seems, has been called away for other business matters. Aside from his original instruction to use the weighted boots, Will hasn't heard anything from him.

"I lied. Told Miss Verger that Red was too tired to jump, then did it anyway. If I was wrong…"

Hannibal's lips twitch in a faint smile. "But you weren't."

"Could have gotten him hurt," Will murmurs.

"I will never claim that horses are as intelligent as people, but I will say this – they will tell you if they are too tired to do what you are asking of them. I do not doubt for a second that, if you truly feared Red was exhausted, you would not have attempted the wall."

And that's true. Still.

"Though I suppose that begs the question; why did you?"

Will swallows again, and keeps his eyes fixed on Red. "I think I got nervous," he confesses quietly. Hannibal lets out a soft, curious sound, and Will presses his lips together and licks them. He can feel Hannibal's eyes on the side of his face, wishes he had the wherewithal to meet them. Hannibal seems like the kind of person who doesn't appreciate people who avoid eye contact.

"I've never jumped anything that high before," he adds, when Hannibal remains silent. The air is still, the only noise the soft rustle of grass and the rhythm of Red's gait as he continues to canter around them, both of them revolving like the nucleus of an atom, keeping him in their sights. "And despite everything, I had no idea if he'd shy last minute, or do something else."

Hannibal hums, at that. "Don't you trust him?"

"Of course I do," Will replies, and turns his head so he can look at Hannibal out of his periphery. "I just…got nervous. It won't happen again."

Hannibal sighs, and reaches forward, taking the rein from Will's hand. He draws it slowly through one hand, coiling within the other, so Red is forced to move in smaller and smaller circles. Hannibal shushes him, as Red slows, tossing his head when he sees Will is no longer holding his rein.

Hannibal smiles at the stallion, and brushes his large hand wide up Red's nose, resting between his eyes. Red snorts, shaking out his mane, but seems content enough to let Hannibal touch him. He works the bit between his teeth, chewing on it lazily, tail swishing to swat at errant flies.

"Does being on display make you anxious?"

Will stiffens, blinking at him, but Hannibal's eyes are on Red. They appear to be locked in some kind of staring match. Red's forelegs quiver and shift under the weights, one of his hindlegs bending so he's standing laxly, as horses often do.

"What do you mean?" Will asks, voice suddenly hoarse.

"Well, as I've said, Miss Katz told me you are quite the accomplished dog trainer. And yet you never have asked for time off to take them to shows – and you have never been to an equestrian competition. I'm merely trying to figure out if that's by choice."

He turns, and looks to Will, brows lifted.

"There's nothing wrong with working behind the scenes," Will replies, feeling like he's suddenly standing on sand rather than grass and mud. "And the stuff I do with my dogs – it's just for fun. I don't need the money, or the stress."

"And the prospect of competing with Red is not fun?" Hannibal asks.

"It's not that," Will argues, and shakes his head, running a hand through his hair. "But it's not *just* about the prizes, you know? I like riding Red, I like working with him. Whether he ended up being a cart pony, or turned into a champion, he's still just…Red."

He shrugs, helplessly, and when he meets Hannibal's eyes, the man is smiling at him.

He gives Will the rein back and parts from Red with one more soft pat to his cheek. "Your uniform came in this morning," he tells Will. "When you're finished, come to the office to try it on, so that we have time to make any alterations before the show."

Will swallows, his heart juddering in his chest at the idea of Hannibal dressing him up to fit the role; of going to the show with him, standing beside him as…what? Protégé? Employee? The voice in his head sounds a lot like Beverly, the excited way she squealed when Will told her he was going.

"Yes, Sir," is all he says.

"Do not think I don't understand, Will – the first time I entered the ring to compete, I was nervous as well. You must learn to tune out your anxieties, and trust your training, and your mount." He smiles. "Who knows? You might actually enjoy yourself."

Will laughs weakly, his fingers curling the rein up tight. "Yeah. Maybe."

"I'll see you later, Will," Hannibal says with a nod, and turns away, walking back towards Mischa, Pergalė, and Olivia. He gathers the little mare's reins and mounts her gracefully, setting with a sigh, and smiles at his sister.

They turn, and continue on to the next field. Mischa looks over her shoulder, and gives Will a little wave. Will waves back.

Red snorts, loudly.

"Yeah, alright, break time's over," Will says, and lets the rein go long, clicking his tongue to get Red to resume his pace. He forces himself not to think of what comes after – doesn't let himself linger on new clothes, a uniform, a new role whatever the Hell it's going to end up being. He doesn't let himself think about the warmth in Hannibal's eyes whenever he smiles at Will.

He works Red until the horse is coated in sweat, breathing hard, and lets him slow to a walk, smiling and petting his sweaty neck, and feeds him a mint. Hannibal and Mischa have yet to return, so he walks Red through the first gate and lets his lead rein go long enough to close it behind him.

They walk together back to the stables, and Will untacks him and relieves him of the weights, brushes him down and makes sure his haylage net and water trough are full. Then, he washes his hands and face, grimacing at the cling of sweat and dander on his skin and clothes. The thought of touching anything with Hannibal's kind of price tag isn't a pleasant one, as he is, but he didn't bring anything to change into.

He goes to the house, and lets himself inside. The office door is open, and within it is a clothes bag, for suits. Beverly is in the office too, and she gives Will a wide, knowing grin.

"Hey," she says. "Hannibal told me you'd be trying this on." She hands it to him, brows lifted very high, and Will sighs, takes it, and rolls his eyes.

"Don't say a fucking word."

"I didn't!" she replies, but Will can *see* her vibrating with excitement. Below the clothes bag, by the hook, are a pair of brand-new riding boots, the same kind Hannibal and Mischa wear. Will grabs them as well, and the leather is so soft and supple it feels closer to butter than a boot – nothing like his heavy shoes, far less clunky.

He sighs. Across the hall is a bathroom, and he goes into it, shutting and locking the door behind him, and sheds his clothes down to his socks and underwear. He takes the opportunity

to wet a washcloth and wipe himself down, careful to make sure he's not particularly gross with sweat anywhere.

He hangs the clothes bag on the back of the door, and opens the zipper.

Inside is a lightweight riding jacket, a dark blue, with a white collared shirt, and white jodhpurs. The innards of the jodhpurs have a line of stitching on the thighs, where there's a little extra padding to protect a rider from chafing or getting too sore in the saddle.

Will sighs, and slides them on. They're so soft they feel like silk, and warm as he pulls them up to his hips. The elastic around the waist is a little loose, but settles comfortably, and the legs are long enough to cover his ankles.

The shirt is similarly soft, feels more like fine sheets when he pulls it over his head. It's a polo shirt, though the collar is stiffer, short-sleeved to accommodate for the weather, and settles around his shoulders perfectly. He tucks it in, and finds that with the extra layer, the jodhpurs are a perfect fit.

He doesn't know if Hannibal asked Bev for Will's measurements, or if he just has the eye for this kind of thing. Doesn't know which is worse.

The jacket fits him like a glove. Of course it does. The sleeves sit comfortably at his wrists, and when he flips the collar of the polo over the jacket, the material settles on his shoulders perfectly, like it was made just for him. Maybe it was.

He fastens the two buttons at the front, and smooths his hands down the soft material, shivering. Looks in the mirror and doesn't quite recognize the emotion in his own eyes.

Beverly knocks on the door. "Come on, man! I'm dying out here – let me see! Does everything fit?"

"Just need to test the boots," Will calls back, and slides them on. A perfect fit again, of course – enough room in the leg piece for him to move comfortably, the soles flat, with no wear on the outside, no uneve soles like Will's other shoes, since Will walks on the outside of his feet.

He pushes his fingers in the little gap, sighs, and wonders if this is how Red feels when Will tightens the girth strap on him. All dressed up and ready to go.

He stands, running his hands through his hair to try and comb it into place, and opens the door, stepping out.

He freezes, because it's not just Beverly in the hallway. Hannibal is there too, his cheeks flushed from riding, his eyes dark. Their gazes lock, and then break, as Hannibal's eyes slowly look him up and down. And again, slower than the first.

A third time, and there's something on his face that looks hungry.

"Holy shit, Will, you clean up good!" Beverly says. At the sound of her voice, Hannibal's expression corrects itself.

"Yes, you certainly looking the part," he says, his voice as rough as Will feels – these are nice clothes, they fit better than anything he's owned in his life, and they're comfortable. But it's hard to figure out if he likes them.

He likes how Hannibal is looking at him, though.

"Everything fits, I presume?" Hannibal says, his eyes sharp as he looks Will over again. He does not look at Will like he might appraise a horse – no, this type of thing is reserved for bars, for bedrooms, for illicit affairs in hotels in a foreign city on company dime.

Will nods, tugging at the sleeves of the jacket. "Seems to," he replies weakly. "No idea how long the white will stay white, though."

At that, Hannibal smiles. "You'll never have a bigger challenge in your life," he purrs, and Will flushes, ducking his head. Between them, Beverly has *that* look on her face again, and Will glares at her when she grins.

"Cool. Well, it fits. I'll just…" He gestures back towards the bathroom door.

Hannibal nods, and Will doesn't flee into the bathroom, but it's a close thing. He breathes out heavily, his hands shaking as he sheds the fine clothes and pulls his normal outfit back on. The drag of his sweatpants is coarse in comparison; his shirt is suddenly so thin and stinks so much of sweat and horse; his shoes feel too heavy on his feet.

This must be how Red feels, too.

He carefully hangs the clothes in the bag as they were, and zips it up, and returns it with the boots to Hannibal's office. Neither Beverly nor Hannibal are there, so Will leaves, and hopes Mischa will let him groom Pergalė and muck out her stall, because if he doesn't give himself something to do with all this nervous energy, he will definitely go crazy.

Neither of them are there, but across from Pergalė's stall, now, is Olivia. She greets him with a soft nicker, ears perked up, and Will smiles and goes to her, letting her put her muzzle in his hand as he gently strokes her forelock.

"Okay, what the *shit* was that?"

Will winces, and doesn't look at Beverly. "I'm not in the mood."

"Will, you could cut the tension in that room with a *knife*. One of those dumb airport knives, too. A *spoon*."

Will doesn't deny it. He's not reasonably sure he could.

"He's my boss," he argues weakly. "And even if he wasn't, the only reason he's letting me train Red is -. I can't jeopardize that."

Beverly huffs, and Will looks at her, finds her arms folded across her chest and one brow arched in a disbelieving look. He sighs. "You don't get it, Bev," he murmurs, and shakes his head. "What if I start…actually doing this? For real? Not just with Red, but other horses he

gives me. If we're in a relationship, it's favoritism, and that's even if I'm any good at it. If I am, great, but if I'm not then I'm just…."

He sighs again, and glares down at his hands.

"I want to earn whatever opportunities he gives me. And I don't want to earn them that way."

Her head tilts.

"I mean, come on – what if I was a woman? It's still inappropriate – just 'cause I have a dick doesn't make it any less so from an outsider's perspective."

She sighs, but nods, pressing her lips together. "I see your point," she says gently, but before Will can be relieved, she adds; "Alright. Answer me this, then: what if you are good at it? What if you become the next Dolarhyde?"

"Then I owe him thanks for giving me the chance in the first place."

"But when does it end?" she presses on. She sighs, and holds up a hand. "I'm getting ahead of myself, really. Do you even like him?"

Will blinks, frowning.

"Like, if you were just two guys who met at a bar or something. Would you give him the time of day?"

Will huffs, and smiles. "I wouldn't kick him out of bed."

She grins. "Alright. So, mutual attraction." She holds her hand up, counting off her fingers. "Mutual interests. I can personally vouch for his character as a friend and boss; he's a pretty awesome guy. Nice family. Smart. Good-looking. Rich as all Hell."

"Your point?" Will snaps.

"Well, when do you think you'll be good enough for him?"

Will blinks at her again, wincing at the blunt question. The way she phrased it, Will knows exactly what she means – when will it be enough? When might Will finally think that they are on equal enough footing, for the rest of it not to matter?

"Honestly?" he murmurs. "I don't think I ever will be."

"*Well*, then that means there's no reason not to start now," she says, her smile gentle but still very wide. "Look, Will, I'll kill you if you ever tell anyone I said this, but you're kind of a catch yourself. You're sweet, and you're kind of weird but in a fun way, and you're not exactly lacking in the looks department."

"Oh, flatterer," he teases. "Don't let Brian hear you talkin' like that."

"Stop derailing," she demands, waving her hand again. She sighs, and pinches the bridge of her nose. "Honestly, I don't know why I bother. You're both idiots."

Will raises a brow. "Both?"

"Yeah. He thinks you're straight."

Will frowns. "When the Hell would that have even come up?"

"When I told him about your dog training and shit, he mentioned it, because I said you had like eight dogs and he was wondering if you managed them all on your own. 'Wife or girlfriend', he was very specific about that. I told him you had neither, and he didn't ask about boyfriends, but." She shrugs. "I think he just assumed."

"And you didn't correct him," Will finishes. Of course she wouldn't – Beverly isn't the kind of person to just out someone. And Will has never made a habit of broadcasting his sexuality.

He sighs, and rests his forehead against his free hand as Olivia snorts, growing bored with them, and moves back into her stall. He shakes his head, clenches his eyes tightly shut, and groans dramatically. "This is ten kinds of awkward and fucked up, Bev. You're killin' me, here."

She pokes his cheek, and he glares at her.

"Look," she says, and makes sure he's meeting her eyes. "I'm telling you this as your friend. You need to get your head out of your ass and figure it out. If you don't wanna fuck him, if you don't wanna date him, that's fine – but don't feed me some bullshit about power dynamics or earning your place or anything like that. Grow some balls, decide what you want, and go for it."

Will glares at her. "You should have been a motivational speaker," he mutters.

"It's one of my many talents!" she replies, grinning. She slaps his shoulder, and he winces at the soreness. "Alright, you hopeless man, good luck and Godspeed. I'm leaving today to arrange the hotels for the show, and I'm sure Hannibal and Francis will have you help out loading all the horses up. I'll see you there!"

"Yeah, see you," Will replies. She turns and walks away, and Will straightens, a thought coming to him. He yells after her; "If you put us in the same room I swear to God I'll kill you!"

She laughs, and throws a peace sign over her shoulder, leaving the stables. Maybe she wasn't going to, but now Will's planted the idea in her head…. Oh, she's absolutely going to arrange for him and Hannibal to have the same room. Maybe even one bed.

"God damn it."

Chapter End Notes

yes this is absolutely turning into a tropefest and I don't care! :D

Chapter 9

They are taking Pergalė, since Mischa has a sister event for dressage in a nearby arena. So, too, the dappled mare is destined to ride with her in the three-day event. Pergalė is unfriendly towards most horses and people, so they put a hood over her eyes and lead her to the trailer, which is large enough to fit up to four horses inside, and so Pergalė and, Will finally learns the dappled mare is named 'Bonnie', will be more than comfortable inside it.

Will visits Red, one last time, smiles sadly as the stallion whinnies at him in greeting, leans his big head over the stall door and puts his muzzle in Will's hands. He looks excited to run, and Will feels a soft ache in his chest, since he knows it'll be at least three days until they see each other again.

"Sorry, big guy," he murmurs, petting gently over Red's soft cheeks. "Not today. I'll be back soon, okay?"

Red snorts at him, lipping at Will's hands, and Will smiles, and feeds him a mint, before he steps away. The sound Red makes is almost confused, since Will isn't walking towards the tack room, but back outside, where Francis is standing while they load Bonnie in behind Pergalė.

He has his arms folded across his chest, eyeing the mare as Jesse leads her in. At his side is Mischa, and she's barely half his height, dressed the most casual Will has ever seen her – jeans and a hoodie that Will suspects she inherited from Hannibal, since it goes almost to her knees and swamps her shoulders.

She grins up at him as he approaches, and he gives her a soft smile and a nod in reply. "I think we will be ready soon," she says. "Will, I would like you to ride with Francis, in the trailer, in case Pergalė decides not to be a lady during the trip."

Will smiles, proud that he is one of the people Pergalė likes. Francis could not calm her on his own. "Of course, Miss Lecter," he says with another nod.

"Hannibal and I will be driving ahead," she tells them. The truck that the trailer is mounted to is a big black monster, shining on the hood and top, caked with old mud around the tires and wheel wells. Will perks up at the sound of a car approaching, and turns to see Hannibal driving and parking his Bentley beside his house.

He emerges from the car, and Will blinks, swallowing harshly. He's gotten so used to seeing Hannibal in suits or riding gear, the sight of him in something as simple as black jeans and a t-shirt is startling. On top of that, protecting him from the cold, is a form-fitting black leather jacket.

He swallows again, and tries not to think too hard about just how good Hannibal looks like that. He doesn't look like Will's boss, right now, or some refined gentleman from a foreign land that owns one of the best training stables in the country. He looks like the kind of guy Will would have met in a bar, on a lonely night, and –.

Stop it.

Hannibal approaches them with a smile, and takes Mischa's duffle bag, which is sitting by her feet, and swings it up so the strap goes over his shoulder. He speaks to her in their language, a quiet word, and she nods and smiles at him, and heads to the car.

Hannibal's eyes lift as Jesse emerges from the trailer, Pergalė and Bonnie secured, dusting his hands off. He walks to the stables without a word, and Francis closes the trailer up, secures the hatch, and walks behind it to the driver seat of the truck.

Will knows the exact moment Hannibal's eyes land on him. The back of the truck already has his three-day bag, and the fine clothes Hannibal bought for him to wear to the show, so Will has nothing in his hands and wishes very fiercely that that wasn't the case. He fidgets, flushing despite himself, and meets Hannibal's eyes.

"How long's the drive?"

"About three hours, if traffic is kind," Hannibal replies. "We should be there in plenty of time for the first event, tonight."

Will nods. He hears, from the stables, Red bluster with impatience, and his mouth twists in a frown. "I don't think he understands what's going on," he says, and looks to Hannibal again. Wonders if it's stupid to feel guilty for leaving him, even for so short a time. He trusts Jesse and Gideon to take care of the horses – they are Hannibal's staff, and they wouldn't be here if they were bad to the animals or incapable of doing their job – but Red is his friend. Red trusts him, and knows him, and Will can't help feeling like he's abandoning Red.

Hannibal seems to understand, though – his face is soft with sympathy, and he hoists Mischa's duffle bag strap a little higher on his shoulder. It pulls at his jacket and shirt, revealing more of his neck than Will has ever seen. His fingers curl in the pockets of his jacket, stuffed there so Hannibal can't see him fidgeting.

"When I was staying in Austria," Hannibal tells him, "there was a horse there that I grew very attached to. The translation of his name was, essentially, 'Troublemaker', and he certainly earned the namesake." Will smiles, imagining such an animal – and Hannibal, as a youth, trying to tame him. "When it came time to leave, I was distraught," Hannibal admits, pressing his lips together. "It was after my first summer there. The next year, though, when I returned, he behaved as if I had merely been gone for a moment."

Will blinks at him, and Hannibal smiles. "Horses are more forgiving than men," he says gently. His head tilts. "You're leaving your dogs behind, as well."

Will nods. "I asked a friend to feed them and take them out while I'm gone."

"Do you feel the same guilt, leaving them behind?"

Will sighs through his nose. "They have each other."

"And Red has Olivia, and Jessie, and Abel," Hannibal says, still very gently, like he's trying to soothe Will's anxieties. Despite himself, Will does feel better for it. "We won't be gone for long, Will, and when you return, I'm sure he will be very happy to see you."

Will manages a smile, and looks down at Hannibal's feet. "Thanks," he says quietly. "That… does make me feel better. I appreciate it."

Hannibal nods, gives Will one more fond smile, and turns away to pack his sister's bag, and get into the car. Will goes to the passenger side of the truck and climbs in, grunting since the height of the truck means it's almost a lunge for him to get into it. He settles into the seat with a sigh, closes the door, and fastens his seatbelt.

Francis grins at him, and holds out an open bag of Twizzlers. "Want one?"

"Sure," Will says, and takes the bag, setting it in his lap as he eats one. He laughs when Francis merely pulls out another from the console between their seats. Inside it, he sees a veritable hoard – sodas and bottled water and snacks similar to the Twizzlers. "Do you always have this stash?" he asks, impressed despite himself.

Francis grins, the scar on his lip baring more of his teeth than normal, and starts the truck, pulling smoothly up behind Hannibal's car as they lead the way down the long, winding drive, and out to the main road. "Since I was a kid," he replies. "Perks of hypoglycemia."

Will frowns. "Diabetic?" he asks.

"Just an overactive metabolism," Francis replies, swallowing the last bite of one Twizzler and starting on another. "Once, during a training run, my blood sugar tanked and I just fell off the horse mid-jump. Hannibal basically ordered me to keep snacks everywhere since."

That sounds like him. "I promise not to eat it all, then," he jokes.

"Help yourself," Francis says with a shrug. "There's plenty. But I might have to kill you if you touch the cherry Coke."

Will laughs. "Noted."

The drive takes a little over four hours, since they hit traffic just shy of the main highway North, but they clear it eventually, and the drive is relatively smooth-sailing for the rest of the time. Will sees the large stadium rise up in front of him, removed from the bustle of Frederick, Maryland. The place is surrounded by trailers, and open-air paddocks where Will sees practice jumps set up. As well, the beginning of the cross-country event course, marked by flags and a tent.

He sits forward, breathing out in awe. Francis has the windows rolled down, and the air is heavy with the scent of horse, of grass, of sweat and manure and hay. It's a vibrant collection

of smells, and the grass is thick and green, well-maintained. There are hundreds of people gathered in the main parking area, unloading their animals, parking their cars.

Hannibal leads them to a removed spot, and parks, and Francis pulls the truck up beside him, killing the engine and setting the emergency brake. They get out of the truck and Will sees, on the edge of this field, a large stable designed to house the animals for the show.

Hannibal approaches Will, and he looks eager now, excited. Will has never seen him like this; like he soaks up the vibrant atmosphere around them, mirroring it back. His own grin is wide, anticipatory, as Hannibal gestures for them to walk together.

"Francis and Mischa can handle the horses," he tells Will. "Come, I want to show you around."

Will nods, and leaves his bag in the trunk, but keeps the half-empty bag of Twizzlers with him, stuffed into his pocket. He and Hannibal walk up the little hill to the main arena, which is a closed-off building, and appears more as a football stadium than anything Will would assume was used for horses.

There are people everywhere, dressed in everything from sweatpants and hoodies to fine riding clothes. He feared he would look out of place, but the wide variety of people puts him at ease – not the number, but it's strangely quiet for the most part. There is none of the raucous, shrill noise he would expect from a crowd.

Hannibal, it seems, notices this as he does. "Equestrians have a remarkably calm presence, I have found," he says. "For the most part. No one wants to startle a horse."

Will smiles. They go into the main arena, through a large, open archway that melts into stalls and stands. Inside is a huge enclosed ring, combed to a flat layer packed dirt and softer sand atop it. There is another archway that has a fence inside it, where showmen can ride their horses straight into the ring.

"The first day will be dressage," Hannibal tells him. "Then cross-country, and then a showjumping circuit to finish."

Will nods, absently. The stands rise up higher than he expected, and are mostly empty of spectators, since the first event will not start for a few hours. There is a sectioned-off place for owners of horses to go, but most of it is dedicated to the masses.

He shivers. "How many people turn up at these things?"

"It varies, but this is one of the main events of the season. I believe we can expect a crowd upwards of several thousand that are just spectators, and perhaps a hundred entries."

So many. Will can't imagine that many eyes on him. Another flicker of anxiety pulses in his chest, and he tries to shrug it off as best he can.

But he cannot help asking, "And puissance?"

Hannibal smiles at him warmly, like he knows where Will's thoughts have taken him as well. "Less entrants," he says. "So less competition, but the event you will be taking Red to is televised – who knows how many people will be watching."

Will's fingers flex in the pockets of his jacket. "I got nervous with just two," he says weakly. He shakes his head, and runs a hand through his hair, uneasy.

"I have every faith and the utmost confidence in you, Will," Hannibal says gently, and brushes a hand over Will's shoulder. It's sudden, unexpected, and Will fights the urge to flinch. He tenses, though, and Hannibal's hand drops, though his face betrays no reaction. "Red is a natural performer, I think you'll agree with me when I say that. Trust his training, trust his ability. The rest will fall neatly into place after."

"If you say so," Will replies, and tries to smile.

Hannibal hums, pressing his lips together, his eyes searching the crowd. "Ah," he says, and smiles, and leads Will over to a lone woman standing by the stalls, looking at her phone. It's Beverly. "Miss Katz, good afternoon."

"Oh, hey!" Beverly says, and grins at them both. She holds up her phone, showing a booking confirmation. "I just got us the hotels. Unfortunately, there were only three rooms left, so I figured you and Mischa could share?"

"That's not a problem," Hannibal says amiably. Will doesn't glare at Beverly, though it's a close thing – he didn't consider Hannibal and Mischa sharing a room, but that makes sense, since they're related. The knot of anxiety loosens somewhat.

She winks at him, like she knows what he's thinking. Will wonders when he became so obvious.

"Come," Hannibal says, and nods to Will. "Francis and Mischa should be done. We will go to the hotel and settle in, and return when it is time for the competition." Will nods, and he and Beverly follow him out.

Will rides with Beverly, and Francis rides with Hannibal and Mischa. Will sighs. "Thanks for not being a dick and making us share a room."

Beverly rolls her eyes. "Did you really think I would?" Will looks at her, and hopes his expression tells her that, yes, he absolutely does think she would. She rolls her eyes again. "Look, Will, you're both idiots and clearly into each other, but I'm not about to make y'all do the 'there's only one bed' thing. Knowing you, you'd sleep on the Goddamn floor."

"Well, I would," Will replies curtly. "I toss and turn a lot – I'm not a good bedmate, or have you forgotten our camping trips?"

"Ugh, no," she says, and grimaces at the memory. Will grins. "But I still think you should talk about it."

"What's there to talk about? He thinks I'm straight, and I think you're still poking your nose into shit when I asked you not to." She sighs, pressing her lips together, and drums her fingers on the steering wheel. Then, Will pauses. "Wait," he says slowly, and she looks at him from the corner of her eye. "There were only three rooms?"

She nods.

"Hannibal will insist on the women sharing," Will says. "You and Mischa."

She touches the tip of her tongue to her upper lip, and smiles slowly.

"Beverly, you are an *asshole*."

"He might share with Dolarhyde," she says coolly, raising a brow.

Will grits his teeth, and tries not to pay attention to the sharp flare of outrage in his chest at the thought of Hannibal and Francis sharing a room, leaving Will alone. He runs both hands through his hair and sighs heavily.

"Or you can share with Francis," Beverly continues.

That thought is not quite as aggravating, but still, Will's heart pulses strangely, and he looks down at his hands, and sighs. "Maybe I will," he says petulantly, and she laughs. "Next you're going to tell me there's only one bed in each room."

"Well…"

"*Beverly*."

"Look, it's what the hotels had available! There's only two within a decent driving distance – one was totally booked up, and the other only had the three left. We get what we get," Beverly tells him, and fixes him with a sharp look. "Buck up, soldier."

"I hate you so much, honestly, it's a wonder we're even friends," Will groans.

She swats him on the flank, and stills when she hears the crinkle of plastic around the candy. "Whatcha got there?" she asks, and Will huffs, and pulls out his bag of Twizzlers. "Jerk! Share!"

"I don't think you deserve it," he mutters, but gives her the bag.

"I'm so sorry, Hannibal, I don't know what happened…"

"It's quite alright, Miss Katz," Hannibal says, unruffled as always. Will thinks he might burst into flames as the harried-looking desk clerk hands them their keys. There were only three rooms – one, with two queens, that Hannibal predictably insisted Beverly and Mischa share. Then, two rooms left. Only a King-sized bed in each.

"I think it's only fair that Mister Dolarhyde gets a room to himself, since he'll be the one performing over the next three days," Hannibal adds lightly. He's not looking at Will, but Will still can't even look in his direction. He might just burst into flames if Hannibal so much as glances at him. "A quiet place to unwind is paramount during high-stress competitions like this."

"Thank you," Francis says with a nod. He shoulders his bag and smiles at them. "Head back out around four?"

Hannibal nods, and Francis walks towards the elevators, the rest of them in tow. They're on the third floor, and the women's room and Francis' are next to each other, but Hannibal and Will must walk almost to the complete opposite side of the hotel. Walking there feels like walking to the guillotine. Hannibal slides the key into the little card reader, and pushes it open.

They go inside, and Will looks with dismay at the big, neatly-made bed. Despite everything, he had held some foolish hope that Beverly was just messing with him, but no, it sits there like a cruel invitation. He's tense, but sees a couch positioned by the window, and goes to it, placing his stuff on it.

"I don't mind taking the couch," he says, when Hannibal is silent. "Hotel beds are normally too soft for me anyway."

"If you prefer it, of course," Hannibal says with a kind nod. "But I won't force you to, Will – the bed is perfectly large enough for both of us."

Will swallows a sigh, and sits on the couch, wincing when his ass immediately hits the metal frame. It's a thin thing, not comfortable at all, and he mentally bemoans the inevitable soreness waiting for him in the future.

But this is better – Will didn't lie; he's a terrible nighttime companion. He has nightmares, and sweats, and tosses and turns a lot. It'll be better for both of them to remain separate.

Hannibal's phone chimes, and he pulls it out, smiling at the message he receives. Will tilts his head curiously. "Mister Gideon sends me reports every afternoon, to keep me updated on affairs while I'm away," Hannibal explains, though Will didn't ask. He wonders, not for the first time, if Hannibal only appears so mysterious because Will just never asks him anything. If that would change, if he tried.

Hannibal shrugs off his jacket, revealing bare arms, golden skin covered in a fine layer of dark hair. Will swallows harshly, breathing out hard, and looks away before he can notice the coil of muscle in Hannibal's arms too closely.

"He just confirmed another sale," Hannibal adds, in the wake of Will's silence. Will perks up at that.

"We're getting a new horse?"

Hannibal purses his lips. "Not exactly," he says slowly. "One of the wards is now officially an asset of ours, to train and compete as we see fit. His owner was surprisingly happy to sell him to me, which is good."

Will frowns. "Which one?"

Hannibal meets his eyes steadily. "Red."

Will blinks at him, and his eyes widen. "You bought Red?" he asks. Hannibal nods. "When?"

Hannibal smiles at him. "Just now. Weren't you listening?"

Will flushes, looking down. His fingers fidget together between his knees. "No. I mean, yes, I was, but -." He looks up again. "Why? When did you decide you wanted to?"

"I first considered it when I saw you calm him, without effort. The idea was cemented in my mind when I saw you jump with him." Will doesn't know what to say to that. "I'm not a man prone to semantics when it comes to business, Will – if Red was not a good acquisition, I wouldn't have considered it, but I know a champion when I see one."

Will bites his lower lip, for Hannibal's eyes have that light in them again. He still doesn't know what to say. To thank Hannibal is inappropriate – Hannibal didn't buy Red for him, after all. And Red would be a good mount for anyone – Will was just lucky enough to take the first crack at it.

But the way Hannibal is looking at him makes Will think it's not insane to think that Hannibal did, in fact, buy Red just for him. For the pleasure of seeing Will compete with him.

He swallows harshly, and says, "Thank you."

Hannibal's smile is warm and wide, and he nods, folding his jacket and placing it on the bed by his bag. "Come," he says, "get dressed and ready, and we will join everyone in the lobby, and make our way back to the show."

Will nods, standing, and grabs his outfit and boots from the couch. He goes to the bathroom and shuts himself inside, his hands shaking with anticipation.

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The arena is very quiet, only a low susurrus providing a background noise as they enter it. Hannibal, Beverly, Mischa, and Will all go to the sectioned-off stands dedicated specifically to the owners and trainers of the horses that are getting to compete. The rest of the arena stands are packed with people of all ages and dress, though the owners' section occupants are all dressed finely. Will is grateful, inwardly, that Hannibal saw fit to buy him something that would help him blend in.

Up in the fourth row, at the very end, they find seats. Beverly takes the end-most perch, citing the fact that she has 'a bladder the size of a pea' and might need to use the bathroom every now and again. Will is next to her, Hannibal next to him, and Mischa taking the inward-most section. The stands are made of metal like every high school stadium Will has ever been in, and cool to the touch – not exactly comfortable, but deep, allowing Will to sit as laxly as he's able.

There is an announcement over the speakers, saying that the first entrant will begin in a few moments. There is a judges' table set up at one end of the flat ring, where two men and two women are sitting, all dressed in expensive suits.

"Are you familiar with dressage at all, Will?" Hannibal asks, quietly so he does not interrupt the soft murmuring of the rest of the crowd as they settle down to wait and watch.

Will shakes his head, and ignores the way his body flushes, hearing Hannibal speak to him so quietly – almost a whisper, that ghosts along his neck and clouds his head like fog. "I've seen a few videos online, but my dad's ranch was never dedicated to that kind of show, so I never learned," he replies.

Hannibal nods, like he expected this. "I think Red would like it," Mischa declares, smiling brightly down the line. "He has kept his dancer's gait."

Will smiles. "I'm excited to see Francis in action," he says, and nods to Mischa. "And you, as well, tomorrow."

Mischa grins at him, and then corrects her stance, looking ahead. At the gate leading to the owners' stands, Will sees a woman entering, her hair artfully styled in a mess of waves that shine golden in the harsh lights. She's not wearing riding gear, but a long black dress that hugs her form, and her arm is linked through that of a man who is dressed more like he runs a casino than owns a stable.

Mischa lets out a quiet sound, and touches Hannibal's arm. She speaks softly, in their language, and points to the pair as they take their seats in the first row. Will doesn't know what she says, but he catches the names 'Bedelia' and 'Anthony'.

Hannibal nods, his eyes on them briefly, lingering on the woman. Will's fingers curl, and he is tense between his shoulder blades, and tries not to think about how seeing Hannibal look at her that way makes him feel. He's been spoiled by Hannibal's attention, for there suddenly seems so much of it.

He swallows down the feeling, as the announcer comes over the speakers again, heralding the first pair. It is a woman, no older than Beverly, and she trots through the open gate on a fine-looking bay stallion. He has thoroughbred in him, Will would recognize that distinctive head shape anywhere, and Arabian too, if the lift of his tail is any indication, the arch of his fine legs that look too skinny for the rest of his frame. Though he knows, of course, that horses are strong, Arabians have skinny and comparatively frail legs. He could not imagine entering this animal in puissance.

The woman trots her mount to the center of the ring, facing the judges, and takes off her helmet, giving them a professional, sharp-looking salute. She turns the stallion about on his forelegs, his hindlegs stepping smoothly in a quarter-circle, and salutes the far-facing stands. Then, the back. Finally, the owners' stands, before righting him facing the judges again.

Hannibal leans in, suddenly enough that Will startles; "See her stance?" he asks, and Will sucks in a breath, and nods. "Her posture is perfect, at a straight angle to her horse. That is what I'm trying to get you to achieve."

Will huffs, smiling. "I'll get there."

Hannibal returns the smile, his eyes bright. "I'm sure you will."

He straightens, and everyone falls silent. Music starts, a huge swell of strings in a major chord, and the woman begins her show.

Will is enthralled – she and her horse move together as though they are one unit. He cannot see anything in the twitch of her hands, the tilt and press of her heels to give away her directions to the horse, and yet her stallion responds to every unseen command. She trots him sideways, to the wall, and kicks him into a canter. His gait seems somewhat stymied, to Will, having grown so used to Red's wild, long strides. The idea of keeping him so contained and controlled makes him swallow.

The music softens, swings to a higher scale, a twittering of flutes and the lower bass of cellos joining the chorus as she leads the horse down a perfect straight line, changing his lead leg as he canters, so that he looks as though he's kicking out in front of him. The horse's head remains perfectly centered, does not bob or weave in either direction, and Will sees the judges note the move down.

"What kind of things do they look for?" he asks, as quietly as he can be so as not to disturb anyone, but that Hannibal might hear.

"Dressage is about poise and elegance," Hannibal replies, just as softly, leaning in so that Will can hear him clearly. He doesn't turn his head, focused on the horse and rider, but Will is warm as though Hannibal is staring right at him. "Not a piece out of place. They will measure the evenness of the motions, the timing of it to the music – they are looking for any obvious

sign that she is manipulating her mount, or that he is anything but perfectly controlled under her hand."

Will nods, absently, and watches. The pair reach the other end of the ring and the woman slows her mount to a trot as the music ebbs back to a string quartet. Will pays attention, notes that every thud of hoof to dirt is in perfect time with the music. The horse's tail swishes twitches to the side, and his ears are forward, attentive.

She circles him around, and has him trot sideways, feet tucked beneath his body and lead leg stretching out wide to let him move. Then, once at the center, the other direction, back to the wall. The kick back to canter puts her off rhythm to the music, and though she corrects it quickly, Will winces.

Hannibal smiles, noticing. "You caught it, too."

Will nods, sitting forward, his elbows on his knees. He remembers watching, back in his youth, a woman and her horse at one of the open shows that were not done for competition, but as a learning and community gathering, where people could gather supplies, buy horses, and attend demonstrations. She had led her animal without bridle or saddle, danced with him with no crop or lead rein. That was true union – much more impressive, he thinks, than this display, though he can certainly not fault the woman's performance.

The song ends as she guides her horse to the center of the ring again, and the final note rings as she salutes the judges once more, a smile on her face. There is a chorus of polite applause, and then she turns, and trots her stallion out through the gate at the opposite end of the ring, disappearing through the second archway.

"Wow," Will breathes.

"An impressive start," Hannibal says with a nod. "Certainly hard to measure up to."

"Do you think Francis will?"

Hannibal gives him a gleeful smile, smug and wide. "We'll have to see, won't we?"

Will flushes, thinking that Hannibal might smile at him like that, one day, for the same reason, and looks away.

Another pair enter, announced over the loudspeaker. It is another woman, with a roan mare, the mare's forelegs wrapped in thin black boots, her mane sleek and shining flaxen, wavy, down her neck. Andalusian, Will would guess, from the stockiness of her legs and head. Will huffs to himself, and wonders if he has always paid more attention to the horses than those who rode them.

She salutes the judges, and then circles to salute each side of the ring, as Will is beginning to understand is customary. The music she performs to is an aria, and Will cannot find a single flaw in her performance.

An attitude the judges do not apparently share, for her score is lower than the first. Will frowns, and looks to Hannibal in question.

"Dressage, like a show-jumping circuit, has specific requirements," Hannibal explains without Will asking. "Every entrant is required to submit what is essentially their planned choreography. Unlike other sports, there is no room allowed for error." He looks at the scoreboard, which hangs above the judges, showing the current rankings. "Evidently she did something that was not scripted."

Will huffs a laugh, and smiles. "If we have to stick to the script, I don't think Red will ever be good at it," he teases.

Hannibal grins at him. "Perhaps not," he says.

Beverly stands. "I'm going to grab us some drinks," she announces. "Anyone want anything?"

"Oh! Do you think they will have Pimm's here, Hannibal?" Mischa says, her eyes bright.

He gives her a fond smile. "I will ask," he says, and stands. Will moves back, so he has room to pass, and he and Beverly make their way down the stairs, past the front row and towards the gate. Will doesn't mean to look, but he looks anyway, and sees the golden-haired woman and her companion straighten at attention as Hannibal passes by.

Mischa shivers, folding one leg over the other, and tugs her jacket around her with a huff of complaint. "Are you cold?" Will asks, and shrugs off his own blazer. "Take mine. I don't need it."

She accepts it with a grateful smile, slinging it over her shoulders. "Thank you, Will!" she says brightly. Her eyes gravitate to the front row again, and she worries her lower lip between her teeth, and sighs heavily.

"You know them?" Will asks, unable to help himself.

She nods. "That is Bedelia Du Maurier and her husband, Anthony Dimmond," she says. Her eyes slant to Will, dark and fleeting, and she sighs again. "They own another stable, much smaller, up North of here. We were all friends for a time."

"'Were'?" Will repeats, leaning in.

Mischa sighs, and looks sad. "They had different opinions on how to run their stables," she explains, very quietly – Will gets the impression that these kind of folk live to overhear private conversations. Perhaps it's an equestrian thing, maybe it's a rich people thing, Will doesn't know. He slides closer, so they can speak as freely as possible. "Bedelia didn't always agree on the animals my brother wanted to buy, nor how he trained them. She despised Mister Dolarhyde, thought him too rough and not suiting with the 'ambiance'." She lifts her hands and does air quotes around the word, rolling her eyes.

Will's brows rise. He presses his lips together, and looks at the back of Bedelia's hair. "She wants to present a certain image," he says.

Mischa nods. "She has always cared what other people think of her," she says, and gives Will a bright, mischievous grin. "Less so, my brother."

And, Will wonders, what would she make of him?

Her ears must be burning, for as he watches her, she straightens, and turns her head. She looks up, and her eyes alight on Mischa, first, and then slide to Will. She has the face of a statue, Will thinks, the kind of look that could have inspired painters back in the Renaissance. One golden brow arches, and her lips purse.

Will stares back, until her attention is caught as Beverly and Hannibal return, drinks in hand. She stands, and approaches Hannibal with a wide, cordial smile, and puts a hand on his arm. Will's fingers curl.

Mischa, it seems, is similarly unhappy at the sight. Her lips pull down in a frown and she glares at Bedelia, and Anthony, as he joins her. Hannibal seems happy enough to have their attention, though Will doesn't know if he's just being polite; if he's that good at pretending.

For the sake of his own pride, he pretends it is so.

Hannibal looks up, meets Will's eyes, and smiles, before he gives Bedelia a polite nod, and steps past her, Beverly in tow. Will hides his smile, seeing her sour look, and she snaps her gaze back up to Will. He waves at her, and her lips purse, pale and sharp, and the pair sit again.

Will slides back into his place, making room for Hannibal to step past him and take his seat. In his hands he has two tall cups, see-through but not glass, holding a lot of ice, a spring of mint and slices of cucumber, and a dark amberish liquid. Will's nostrils flare, smelling gin.

He hands Mischa her cup and smiles at her when she crows in delight, taking a sip. Beverly nudges Will, and she's holding two cups as well. She gives him one, and Will raises a brow, and takes a sniff. It's whiskey, pricey enough, he would guess, that it smells smooth as he breathes it in.

She winks at him, and takes a sip of her rum and Coke.

"What is that?" Will asks, nodding to Hannibal's cup. He and Mischa got the same.

"Pimm's," Hannibal replies. "It is popular in Britain – a gin-based drink, and as close as they might come to sangria." He tilts his head. "Would you like to try it?"

"No, thanks," Will says, and hides his shudder into his glass. "Gin and I have a love-hate relationship."

Hannibal laughs. While he was gone, another two performers came and went, and Will didn't pay attention, but he perks up when he hears, over the loudspeaker, Francis and Bonnie announced.

Francis has bound her tail around the bone, and braided the rest in a thick style so that it is half its length. Her mane is set in the row of sharp bumps atop her neck, showing the arch of

it as he walks her into the center of the ring. He salutes the judges, and the crowd, and then goes utterly still. Even Bonnie, animal though she is, is perfectly poised.

The song begins, in a sharp bray of trumpets and quivering drumbeats. Bonnie explodes into action, straight into a canter from a standstill, and races to the judges' table. Francis pulls her up short, his seat deep and his posture perfect, and has her prance from side to side, backwards, her forelegs wide around her hindlegs so she doesn't step on herself.

The drums sound again, and Francis leads her in that familiar side-trot, back and forth. Will smiles, reminded of how he had exercised Red. Francis' music accompaniment is by far the most lively of the performers they have seen so far, and he looks…. Well, his face is impassive, stern with concentration, but Will thinks he can see, in the way Bonnie and he move together, excitement, happiness.

They're having fun.

Will smiles, and, beside him, Hannibal is smiling too.

Will sips his whiskey, the alcohol smooth enough that he doesn't hiss, and it warms him immediately, much like feeling Hannibal's gaze upon him does. Francis leads Bonnie in a series of tight circles, showing her perfect form and sure feet, and Will, still, cannot tell how he moves to guide her this way, or that, but he doesn't doubt for a moment that there is not a single step out of place.

He leads her down the center again, exchanging lead legs in that familiar canter-kick, and Will sits up straighter as the drums begin to build to a crescendo. He leans forward, enraptured by the performance, and grins widely when Francis finishes by having her spin, dirt flying in a sharp arc around her hindlegs.

Then, the music cuts off, suddenly, and Bonnie is immediately still, and motionless, standing in a perfect square. In the silence, Francis salutes.

Will sucks in a breath, and looks to the scoreboard, finding that he achieved an almost perfect score.

Hannibal sits back, obviously pleased, and watches Francis walk her out. "An excellent start," he purrs, and Will shivers, rubbing his hand along the back of his neck. Hannibal stands, then, and brushes a hand down the front of his jacket. "If Francis keeps his lead, he will be one of the first to run tomorrow, and I know you are going to want to get your rest," he says, with a nod to Mischa. "Shall we?"

Will nods, for while it is certainly diverting to watch, there are many more performances to see, and Will doesn't think anyone could live up to Francis right now. And, a treacherous part of him that sounds very much like Beverly whispers that the sooner they leave, the sooner he and Hannibal will be alone in their hotel room again.

Not that anything will happen. Not that he *wants* anything to happen.

Hannibal gives Mischa his drink, citing the need to drive, and she follows them all as they leave the stands and the owners' section, through the archway, and towards the holding stalls for the animals. They find Francis there, unwrapping Bonnie's mane and tail.

He grins at them. "Not a bad start," he says.

"You both performed admirably, as I knew you would," Hannibal says warmly, and Will's stomach clenches. He thinks of performing with Red, with similar success. Wonders what it would feel like to have Hannibal's approval so heavy on him alone. It's no wonder Francis is such a loyal trainer.

Francis grins at them all, and pets Bonnie's glistening neck. "I still need to rub her down," he says. "Can one of you stay and drive me back?"

"I will!" Beverly says, smiling. She sips at her drink and looks at Will. "You wanna stay?"

"I'm good," Will replies, and though he says nothing more, her smile turns sly and knowing. He resists the urge to roll his eyes at her, and hands her his whiskey. She gives it to Francis immediately, and they click their plastic cups together, and drink.

"Make sure you don't stay up too late," Hannibal warns, fond but firm. "I won't have you lose your lead."

"Of course," Francis says. Will presses his lips together. No one seems to call Hannibal 'Sir' except him. He wonders if Francis ever did, and Hannibal corrected him like he did Will. Wonders if Hannibal likes being called that at all.

"Well, I will see you both tomorrow," Hannibal says with a nod, and leads the way out of the stables. Mischa finishes her drinks and disposes of them in a nearby receptacle, already half-full of similar cups and sloshes of melted ice. They go to Hannibal's car, and Will climbs into the backseat while Mischa takes the front passenger side.

Mischa shivers, turning the heat up high, and tugs off Will's jacket, handing it back to him. Will takes it and shrugs it back on gratefully. "When's your show tomorrow?" he asks.

"I'm scheduled for noon," Mischa replies. "Plenty of time to catch the beginning of the cross-country. Oh, Will, it's going to be so much fun! It's my favorite event by far."

Will's brows rise, for he has never heard of her taking Pergalė to such an event. Hannibal smiles, and gives Will a conspiratorial look in the rearview mirror. "Mischa likes watching people fall," he tells him.

"I do not!" Mischa replies crisply, and slaps his arm. "Don't say such things, you devil!"

"Oh?" Hannibal replies, laughing as they begin the slow navigation of pedestrians and other cars, out of the field and towards the road. "Last year, then, when Anthony fell off his mare, you could not stop laughing for hours."

"That's different," Mischa says. Will smiles, sitting back, warmed by the siblings' good-natured teasing. "I enjoy watching people who think they are better than us taken down a

peg." She turns in her seat and looks at Will. "Don't you?"

"Oh, undoubtedly," Will replies.

"See?" Mischa says, and sits straight again, grinning at Hannibal.

Hannibal smiles, and reaches across the console, squeezing her hand before correcting his posture. Will closes his eyes, tipping his head back, content to listen to the siblings bicker as they revert to their native tongue, laughter and soft jabs exchanged in that smooth language.

He is just on the edge of dozing when the car stops, and then suddenly he is wide awake. Hannibal parks in the hotel lot, and they get out, and part ways at Mischa's door. She gives Hannibal a peck on the cheek, and smiles at Will, and they wait until she is safely inside her room before going to their own.

Will sighs, and takes the bathroom first, brushing his teeth and shedding his clothes and changing back into a pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt, and rucks his hands through his hair. He leaves, and Hannibal takes his place, performing his nightly routine as Will fishes out spare bedding and pillows from the closet, and tries his damnedest to make the couch somewhat comfortable.

He's lying down on it, grimacing at the grit of metal frame against his hip and shoulder, when Hannibal emerges. He's wearing lounge pants that look terribly soft and silken, his white t-shirt from before, and he combed the product out of his hair, making it lay flat and wet atop his head.

He looks at Will, and presses his lips together, eyeing the bed. He goes to the far side without a word, pulls the covers back, and slides into place. There are light switches by the bed, allowing him to turn off all the lights save the bedside lamp.

"I normally read before bed," Hannibal tells him. "Will the light bother you?"

Will shakes his head. "No. Thanks for asking, but if I can fall asleep with a pack of dogs snoring around me, I can sleep anywhere."

Hannibal laughs. "Well, if you change your mind, please let me know," he says. He settles against the pillows, and takes a tablet from his bag on the side table, opening it so the screen illuminates his face in sharp white lines.

Will turns around, hiding his eyes from the light, and sighs.

"And, Will, I truly meant what I said – if the couch is not comfortable, please don't suffer through it. The bed is big enough for both of us."

Will shivers, and swallows harshly. He nods, and shifts his weight, trying to get comfortable. He closes his eyes, tries to tune it out and focus, instead, on Hannibal's soft breathing, on his own rushing heartbeat as he tries to calm it.

He stretches his bad shoulder, presses it to the couch, and groans when it pops, pins and needles spreading down his arm. Hannibal says nothing, but Will can feel his eyes on the

back of Will's neck, as he settles again and tries to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

don't worry, everyone, we'll get exactly what we expect next chapter /rubs hands together

Chapter 11

Will sleeps restlessly, the couch far too uncomfortable and thin to get any kind of cushioning, even with all the negotiation and blankets he can muster. He manages to catch fits of it between listening to Hannibal's breathing, forcing himself to stay still until Hannibal is finished reading and his breath evens out in sleep, and pops his shoulder again, stifling a snarl against his pillow.

Will wakes to the sound of an alarm, and rolls onto his back, hissing when, just as he knew they would, his shoulder and hip scream in protest. He flexes his fingers and toes, and tries to fit his shoulder beneath him to pop it again, but the joint is so warped, his muscles so tightly knotted and screaming, that he can't, even when he puts his entire weight on the joint.

Hannibal stirs, and shuts off the alarm. Will hears him rising, and tries to get up, but his arm is all but useless and he collapses onto the couch with another groan.

"Are you alright, Will?"

Will grits his teeth, starting to sweat from the pain. "M'fine," he growls. "Shoulder locked up. Just give me a minute and -."

He falls silent, as Hannibal immediately comes to him, and pushes Will onto his stomach. Will turns his head, at level with Hannibal's knees, and winces when Hannibal's touch settles on his bad shoulder. Hannibal tuts, and sighs through his nose, and though his touch is unbearably light it still makes Will's shoulder scream in protest. It goes up to the base of his skull and halfway down his back, the ache, and he'll admit the sound he lets out is pretty damn pathetic when Hannibal runs his fingertips between shoulder blade and spine.

"Come here," Hannibal says, and helps Will upright on his good arm. Will hisses, clenching his teeth when his hip locks up for a moment too, but he manages to get upright, and then promptly falls onto the bed, face-first. Hannibal huffs a laugh and helps Will to lie flat on the undisturbed side – stupid, but Will kind of hoped it would smell like him. It doesn't.

"Here." Hannibal does not hesitate, as he pushes Will's shirt up to his armpits, and then loops it over his head, letting it remain tucked beneath his chin. "Wait here for a moment. I brought some of the salve with me – it'll help."

Will doesn't really have a choice regarding moving, and he's sure there's plenty of time for the salve to do its work before they have to leave, but he still gives a meek protest when he hears Hannibal returning; "We're going to be late."

"Nonsense, Will," Hannibal replies, and sets the jar of salve on the nightstand on Will's side of the bed. "There's plenty of time. Is it just this shoulder?"

"My neck feels pretty bad too," Will says.

He turns his head so he can see Hannibal nod. He looks, well, he looks pretty damn good if Will does say so himself, all mussed with sleep and soft-looking. Hannibal is eyeing him sharply, like he might if he were diagnosing a horse's lame leg, and his lips purse with displeasure.

"If you were uncomfortable, you should have come to bed," he says, a gentle but firm reprimand. Will blinks at him, and flushes, turning his face to the pillow, and pushes the phrasing from his mind because Hannibal's first language isn't English no matter how well he speaks it, and *he doesn't mean in that way, Will, stop it*.

Hannibal unscrews the lid of the jar, and Will's nostrils flare at the minty scent of the salve as it worms its way into the air. He tenses instinctively, because he knows it's going to hurt like a bitch.

Hannibal pauses, and says, "This will be easier if you allow me to sit on your legs. Is that alright?"

Will pushes his hands beneath the pillows and thinks, very emphatically, *Shit*. "Yeah," he says hoarsely, and then clears his throat. "Whatever you need to do." Hannibal nods, and the mattress dips as he plants a knee on the edge of the mattress and climbs over Will. He swings a leg over like he might a horse, and settles on Will's thighs, his own spread wide and comfortable, and Will stifles a laugh and tries with all his might not to make a joke about 'mounting' or 'riding'.

It's a close call, and the only thing that saves him is the fact that his throat is suddenly too tight to speak. He tries not to tense up, because he knows for a fact Hannibal will feel it if he does.

Hannibal plants a hand between his shoulder blades, and presses as he lifts up to his knees, and gathers some of the salve on his fingers. He spreads it in a small coating along Will's worse-off shoulder, not quite pressing yet, just letting the numbing agent and menthol coax Will into relaxing.

Then, he pauses, and promises, "This will hurt."

Will nods, and closes his eyes.

Hannibal does not hesitate. He finds the scar on Will's shoulder easily, knowing that that is the central culprit for most of his knots, and digs in with his knuckles. Will flinches, shuddering, pain building up around the knot in his shoulder, tighter and tighter despite Hannibal's strong fingers. Hannibal's other hand slides up and wraps around the back of his neck, and whether it's to keep him down or to work the tense muscle on either side of his spine, Will doesn't know, but he gasps at the feeling, breathing hard into the dampening pillow as he starts to sweat, and shakes under the onslaught.

Hannibal eases off, pulling Will back from the sprint, sweeps his thumb up around his shoulder blade and comes at the knot from the tip of the scar instead, his thumb digging in and the rest of his fingers forming a tight bridge beneath, so that it's pinched and has nowhere

to run. Will is panting heavily, the hand on his good arm forming a fist that he fits to his teeth so he doesn't make a sound.

Sounds keep coming out of him, though, wrenched from deep in his chest and the back of his throat. He groans as he feels a tiny piece of the knot give, though the battle is far from over. They cleared the first hurdle, and Hannibal gives him only a moment to breathe, before he guides Will to the next. Even with the salve doing its work, Will feels every tense cell in his shoulder quiver and flex, ready to fight.

Over the roar of his blood in his ears, he can hear Hannibal grunt with effort as well, feels his body tense and tighten around Will as he seeks to put every ounce of strength he has into working the knot out. It's a fierce son of a bitch, worse than anything Will's had before, and he bites out a curse towards that damned couch and his own stubborn pride that exiled him there for the whole night.

He can feel the give coming, like it did before. There's only so much his muscles can take before they must submit to bone and knuckle. Hannibal flattens his palm and rubs over his shoulder with the heel of it, his other hand leaving Will's neck and cupping the front of his shoulder so he can rise into the pressure. Will whimpers against his knuckles, bites down on them, and clenches his eyes tightly shut.

"You're going to sleep in this bed tonight," Hannibal says, and if Will's shoulder wasn't filling his head with pain he would pay a *lot* closer attention to how breathless Hannibal sounds. With the way he's sitting, Will can't kick out or buck, and he's helpless as Hannibal curls his fingers and begins to work the knot again. "That's an order, Will."

"Y-yes, Sir."

"Good," Hannibal purrs, and it must have been what he was waiting for. Will's skin burns, feels raw and chafed under the salve and Hannibal's strong fingers. Hannibal digs his knuckles into the center of the knot and presses, unrelenting, fierce and forceful, and Will cries out and bites down on the meat of his thumb hard enough to welt when it finally *gives*.

His entire arm tingles, and he gasps, breathily heavily as Hannibal immediately gentles, though his touch is still firm, working in slowly expanding circles to get the knot to release and melt into the rest of Will's muscles.

"Oh, *fuck*," Will breathes, and feels blind when he opens his eyes, dragging his forehead against the sweat-damp pillow. He's trembling beneath Hannibal's hands, and wonders if this is how Red feels after a long run; he's burning, his heart is pounding in his throat, and he can't catch his fucking breath.

"The worst is over," Hannibal replies, soothing and low, and Will whimpers as he finds another knot around his shoulder blade – much smaller, and much more easily dealt with. His other hand flattens on Will's other shoulder, measuring the comparative tension in each, and slides up to his neck.

Will doesn't want to call the sound he makes a moan, but that's exactly what it is – he melts under the touch on his neck, he's always been soothed by a hand there, or in his hair, and the

sudden release of tension and the removal of pain turns him to liquid. His neck is sore, but not nearly as painful.

He gasps, and Hannibal leans forward, and cups his jaw, making him rise. Hannibal's lips touch the tip of his red ear, and he whispers, "Relax." Will trembles, managing to make his arms move so he's propped up on his elbows, and Hannibal grips his jaw gently, fits the saddle of his other hand at the base of Will's neck, and gently turns him to one side until it cracks.

Will groans, limp, as he does it the other way. It pops three times in this direction, and then Hannibal cups his throat, fits his fingers and thumbs to either side of Will's neck, and drags his other hand up, kneading Will's neck until his head falls forward. Hannibal lets out a quiet, pleased sound, and lets him go, smoothing his hands down Will's shoulders again.

"How does that feel?"

"Like night and day," Will replies hoarsely. The pain is ebbing, soothed to a dull, ignorable throb. He stretches his arms above his head, grateful to see that he can, and rolls his shoulders with another sigh. Hannibal moves with him, effortlessly shifting his weight to accommodate Will, and Will freezes as Hannibal's weight settles, higher on his thighs, against his ass.

He clears his throat, and doesn't dare move. Hannibal doesn't seem to notice – he's still rubbing Will's back gently, though now Will doesn't think he could call it anything other than 'petting', almost idly, like he might pet a horse.

"You still have some tension," Hannibal murmurs, and Will wants to laugh, because yeah, of course he does – even as skilled as Hannibal is, he can't remove all of Will's aches without spending a lot of time doing it. Will has decades of abuse to his body to make up for, and that won't be cured by a twenty-minute massage.

But that's not why he's tense.

"I'm not…used to being touched this much, I guess," he says instead.

Hannibal hums, but doesn't stop. "A pity," he says lightly. "Physical touch has been known to do wonders for a person's mental health, both platonic and otherwise."

Will shouldn't say anything. He should keep his damn mouth shut. But he's shaking and he's sore and he really, *really* needs to know what Hannibal is thinking right now. "Is this… platonic? Or otherwise?"

Hannibal's hands do still, then, but don't withdraw. Will doesn't turn his head, keeps his forehead planted firmly on the pillow and refuses to even try meeting his eyes. He worries the collar of his shirt between his teeth, bites down.

"Well," Hannibal says slowly, "I don't usually offer my salves and massages to all of my employees, if that's what you're asking." Is that what Will is asking? "Though I haven't had any before with such terrible form as you have."

Will huffs a laugh. "Right."

"I don't mind doing this for you, Will. It's no trouble."

Will's fingers curl. "That's not what I'm asking. I know you wouldn't offer if you didn't want to."

Hannibal lets out another quiet noise, not quite a laugh.

"Then what, exactly, are you asking?" he purrs. Promises, promises. Will is suddenly tense all over again. Hannibal notices, and tuts, resuming his gentle, firm strokes up Will's back, trying to ease the tension away.

His hands flatten, cupping Will's heaving ribs, thumbs in the dip of his spine and dragging down.

"I'm not straight," Will blurts out. Hannibal's hands go still again. "Bev told me you think I'm straight. I'm not. I'm not gay either. I like both."

"As do I," Hannibal murmurs, very softly, like he can't quite believe it.

"Do you…like me?" Will asks, and winces, because it sounds so middle school.

Hannibal breathes out, and says, "Yes, Will, I like you very much."

"Platonically?"

"If you prefer."

Will huffs, swallowing back a frustrated growl, and rears up, forcing Hannibal off him. He turns, and sits, and pulls his shirt back into place over his head because he needs to not be half-naked, needs Hannibal not to be touching him, when he says this. He meets Hannibal's eyes.

"Don't bullshit me," he demands. Hannibal blinks at him, and smiles widely. He's flushed, too, his eyes bright. God, he looks good like that. Will gestures between the two of them. "You're my boss, and I know that, and if this is gonna stay professional then it needs to agreed on from both sides."

Hannibal hums, and tilts his head. His eyes rake Will up and down – not appraising, not anymore. No, Hannibal has already decided. "And if I don't want to keep things professional?"

"Then tell me," Will says. "But it's one way or the other." Hannibal's lips purse, and he lifts his chin. "I can compartmentalize. Can you?"

Hannibal's brows rise, and he looks down at his hands, which are shiny with remnants of the salve. He wipes them on his lounge pants, his knees still spread wide over Will's legs, though he's sitting lower now, across his shins. It can't be comfortable, but Will resists the urge to move and draw attention to himself.

"Just tell me, Hannibal," Will begs, and reaches out, touching the back of his hand. "Please."

Hannibal sighs, and cradles Will's hand with both his own. He raises it to his lips, kissing the knuckles so gently it's like a breath of air, and warmth. "I enjoy watching you," he says, and Will shivers. "When you ride, when you work. I trust your judgement, and your sharp eyes, and it pleases me greatly to know that you trust mine." Will nods, swallowing harshly. "I think you and I would be very compatible, but you're right – you are my employee."

Will nods. "It would look bad," he agrees. "You bought me clothes, gave me a high-profile animal when I had no real experience with training horses, you…. You *bought* Red." Hannibal smiles. "Did you do that for me? Be honest."

"You played a major role in the decision, yes," Hannibal replies.

Will smiles, his chest warm, his head light with disbelief. "I'm not asking you to change your behavior around me," he says. "In public, I get it, I need to prove I was worth your faith before it comes out, so people don't just…assume." Hannibal's eyes flash, dark with understanding. "I just needed to know if I was reading too much into it."

Hannibal smiles. "Then let me cure you of all your doubts," he murmurs, and he lets go of Will's hand, and cups his cheek instead. Will sucks in a breath, but lets Hannibal pull him in, tilts his head as Hannibal tilts his.

The touch of his lips is warm, unbearably soft, and Will growls, parting his lips to let Hannibal lick between them, gripping his forearms tightly as Hannibal's other hand flattens on his neck, helping Will to stay upright as he slides up Will's legs, until he's straddling Will's thighs again. Will's exhale is shaky, and he's sure his morning breath isn't great, but Hannibal doesn't seem to mind. He kisses Will passionately, holds him still and drinks his fill, until Will's heart is flying for another reason entirely.

Hannibal pulls back for air, and Will growls and grabs at him, hauling him close again. Hannibal laughs into the next kiss, settling with a pleased rumble deep in his chest, as Will tilts his head and wraps a hand around the back of his neck, holding him fast as Hannibal did to him. He's good at this part, reading the physicality of another person; Hannibal will find no fault in his form here.

When they part for more air, Hannibal's eyes are black, his cheeks a lovely, dark pink. He sighs, and pets Will's hair from his face, curling and tugging lightly, making Will's lashes flutter. He hums, and dips his head, lightly nuzzling Will's jaw, down to his neck, and Will gasps, hands tightening on Hannibal's hips.

"You are wonderfully responsive," he purrs, the warmth of his exhale making Will shiver. "Though the idea of seeing you perform already pleased me, having others watch you, and knowing you are mine…" He doesn't finish the sentence, but Will can feel it, in the heat of his hands and the weight of him over Will's thighs.

"I won't let you down," Will breathes.

Hannibal smiles, and pulls back, and gives Will one last long, chaste kiss. "I know, darling," he purrs, and then pulls back further, climbing off the bed. Will's cheeks flush, seeing that Hannibal is not unaffected either, though he makes no motion to hide or correct the bulge in the front of his lounge pants, and does nothing to address it, either. "Now get dressed, and we will meet Mischa, Beverly, and Francis for breakfast, before the cross-country event starts."

Will nods, breathless but eager, and climbs out of bed. Hannibal lets him have the first shower, and Will goes, and though his shoulder is still sore and twinges when he cleans himself, it doesn't hurt nearly as badly. The sensations capturing his attention most are the sensitive tingle in his mouth, the grip of Hannibal's hand on his neck, the promising weight of him across Will's lap.

When Will emerges, toweling his hair dry and redressed in his sleep clothes, Hannibal passes him with a soft, almost absent brush across his stomach. It strikes Will, deeply, and he watches the door close, before his eyes slide to the bed.

He presses his lips together, and looks to the couch, before he grabs the pillows and blankets he used there and piles them back in the closet. He's not going to need them tonight.

Chapter 12

They meet everyone for breakfast, and though Will can't see anything overtly different in the way Hannibal carries himself, he seems to be positively *glowing* with satisfaction. Or maybe Will's projecting. His shoulders are sore, his mouth still aches, he can't look at Hannibal without feeling a warm, promising tension in his belly, that brings with it images of them sharing the bed, of Hannibal's big hands spreading out over his thighs, cupping his face and his neck the way he did only moments ago.

They are dressed for the day, Will back in that fine outfit Hannibal bought him, Hannibal in the same ensemble, though now his jacket is a rich, dark purple, subtly tinted red in a crisscross pattern. They take the elevator down and find Beverly, Mischa, and Francis all gathered around the little podium that marks the entrance to the dining area.

Maybe Hannibal does look different, because Mischa looks him up and down, and smiles wide. "My, brother! You are in a wonderful mood," she says brightly. Hannibal smiles at her, and Will determinedly does not look at Beverly, though he can feel her looking at him meaningfully, trying to get his attention.

"It's a beautiful day," Hannibal replies, and he's right – the sun is shining outside and the day promises to be pleasant and warm. The trees shiver with a light breeze, and Will can hear birds chirping outside. It's picturesque and perfect. Hannibal leads the way in after giving the room numbers to the hostess, and they find a table large enough to sit them all. Hannibal takes the head of the table, Will on his left, Mischa on his right, Francis beside Will and Beverly beside Mischa. "I trust everyone slept well?"

"Like a baby," Francis says with a nod. "And you?"

"Wonderfully, yes, thank you."

Will stands, his eyes already on the buffet, which looks freshly-stocked and has a short line this early in the morning. Beverly follows immediately, trailing after Will so close she almost steps on his heels, and Will rolls his eyes and takes a plate from the end. "Nothing happened," he says.

"Will, do *not* play with my emotions like this," Beverly says, and takes a plate as well. The first station has eggs, bacon, and sausage links, and Will piles a hearty amount of each on his plate. She only takes some eggs. "Did you seriously take the couch?"

"As a matter of fact, I did," Will replies coolly. His shoulders twinge at the memory. "And it was awfully uncomfortable so that's on you."

Beverly rolls her eyes as they move to the next section, Francis taking up their place at the first, with Mischa and Hannibal in tow. This station has bagels with packets of cream cheese, a series of waffle makers, and fresh fruit. The fruit looks older, and very watery, but Will takes some anyway because sugar is good for a long day.

He sighs, as they walk back to their tables and set their food down, before heading over to the beverage table, which is cluttered thickly with pitchers of various juices, a coffee machine, the kind where you select the type you want and it pours it out into those little plastic cups that are far too thin to protect hands from the heat, and a jug of skim milk. Will fills a little glass with apple juice and Beverly has orange.

"Bev, I'm begging you, just let it go," Will says, and he would feel guilty over continuing to keep a secret from her, but it's none of her damn business and she's been enough of a pain in the ass about it for him to feel a little vindictive, righteously pleased at keeping her out of it. "I'm not going to get into a relationship with my boss just because you want me to and you think it should happen."

Beverly grumbles to herself, pinching the bridge of her nose. "You are the most stubborn, idiotic, *aggravating* person. Why are we friends?"

"Because you know I'm as good as you'll ever get," Will replies with a grin, winking at her, and they go back to their table. Francis is already there, his plate piled high with fruit and bread rolls and meat. He grins at Will, and they all start to eat as Mischa and Hannibal return. The siblings are speaking softly in their language, and Mischa's eyes are bright.

Hannibal takes out his phone, and smiles as he sits. "Looks like you're fifth in place, Francis," he says, and Francis nods. Will assumes he stayed until the end to know when he was up – rank determines who rides first in the cross-country track. "We shall have to eat quickly for you to make it on time."

"When are you set to perform?" Will asks Mischa.

"Noon, I think," Mischa says, and looks to Hannibal, who searches on his phone and confirms with a nod. She claps her hands together, grinning – both siblings only have a bowl of yoghurt and granola, and are drinking water, and Will begins to eat, smiling to himself.

Beneath the table, Hannibal's knee brushes against his, too firmly to be an accident, and Will can't help purring inwardly, warmed in his chest at the casual touch. He thinks, if Hannibal considered it appropriate, he would insist on holding Will's hand – he's a tactile man, Will knows that, and feels himself looking forward, more than anything, to them retiring to their room tonight.

But there are shows to see, performances to be done. He stamps down the heat and focuses on eating.

They eat quickly, as Hannibal commanded, and take two cars – Beverly and Francis in one, Will with the siblings in Hannibal's car – and drive to the performance grounds. They head to the stables, and find Bonnie and Pergalė in neighboring stalls. Francis and Beverly walk to Bonnie, and Francis enters her stall as Mischa enters Pergalė's. The mare tosses her head, whinnying in high greeting at the sight of her mistress, and stands patiently as Mischa begins to braid and style her mane.

"Oh, Hannibal!"

Will stiffens, and turns to see Bedelia and Anthony approaching them. Anthony is dressed in riding gear, the rival in price and finery to Hannibal's outfit, Bedelia in another dress, this one blue and form-fitting and, Will thinks, not exactly practical for a stables. She's wearing cream-colored stilettos, and the brightness of her dress washes her face out, her golden hair shining far too brightly.

"Bedelia," Hannibal greets warmly, though he makes no move to offer his hand or greet them with a physical touch. "Anthony. A pleasure as always." He nods to Anthony's getup. "Are you performing today?"

"In dressage, yes," Anthony replies. "We have a new filly making her debut."

"Oh, excellent. Mischa is performing today as well."

"Not you?" Bedelia asks, and arches a single brow.

Hannibal shakes his head. "Not this weekend, no."

"A shame," she purrs, and smiles. She wears no wedding ring, and Will doesn't like how she looks at Hannibal at all. Whether they had an affair before Bedelia's marriage or not, he is determined to never ask, but it's hard not to let the insidious thoughts creep in.

He clings to the way Hannibal touched him, to the way he'd sounded when he called Will 'his', and tries to keep his expression neutral.

"When is your time?" Hannibal asks.

"Twelve-thirty," Anthony replies with a smile. He seems charming enough, Will thinks, though he doesn't really like the way he's looking at Hannibal either. "I insist you come watch. She really is a fine animal, trained by Signore Pazzi."

"I wouldn't miss it," Hannibal says. They nod at him, exchanging another set of warm smiles, and turn away to join the crowd, which Will knows has begun to gather in full around the starting tent for the cross-country event.

Will snarls at their backs, and turns away, catching Hannibal's gaze. His eyes are black, and he's smiling in that way he does that doesn't change the shape of his mouth, but sits in the corners of his eyes. "You don't like them," he says.

"Mischa told me you were friends, once," Will replies.

Hannibal's head tilts. "Are you jealous?" He doesn't sound pleased by that, just genuinely curious.

Will refuses to break his gaze. "Should I be?"

Hannibal does smile, then, wide and warm. "No," he says. Like that is that. Will supposes it is – Hannibal does not give out his affection lightly, or falsely.

Will nods, and puts his eyes between Bonnie and Pergalė as they are readied for their respective events. He startles when Hannibal's hand touches his shoulder, and he raises his voice; "We will see you in the event, Francis. Ride well." Francis nods, smiling, and turns his attention away. "Miss Katz, would you like to join us now, or later?"

"I'll stay," Beverly replies, and gives Will a wide, conspiratorial smile. Will resists the urge to roll his eyes, but just barely.

Mischa comes out of the stall to give Hannibal a brief embrace, and he kisses the top of her flat hair. "Good luck," he tells her, and then he leads Will out of the stalls and over the little hill that crests to the beginning tent where the cross-country track will start. There is a map, for spectators, marking the course and the jumps within, and Will goes over to it, eyeing it curiously.

He swallows, and looks at Hannibal as he appears at his side. "Some of these look pretty daunting," he says.

Hannibal smiles, and nods. "The entire course is about three miles," he says. "It is meant to test a horse's endurance, and a rider's ability to coax them into approaching any jump fearlessly. It requires a lot of trust and faith in each other."

Will presses his lips together.

"Come," Hannibal says, and nods to one of the jumps. "We will stand by the table, here." He points to a jump in the first half of the course, that is a cartoonish depiction of a large flat surface made of wood. He leads the way from the posting and towards it. "This is where a lot of horses tend to fall – they don't see the flatness of the table, and think it's just a normal jump. They can stumble or trip if they are not prepared."

"Do you think Francis will?"

"I have every faith in him, just as I have the utmost faith in you. And Bonnie is a light-footed animal, and knows to look ahead. I'm sure she will not fail him."

Will nods. They walk in silence for a little longer, until they approach a line of wire posted with hooks, separating the audience from the course. It stretches out wide in front of them, and Will sees the jump Hannibal was describing. It sits at the middle rise of a hill, and he winces internally, knowing that a horse, unless they saw it from the top of the hill, won't know on sight that it's so flat and wide. It's large enough for a full stride, and dips sharply, leading down the hill again towards a ravine with a stone wall over which is flagged another jump.

"What's your favorite event, of the three?" he asks. There are a few people around them, engrossed in their own conversations, and mostly clustered under the shade of a large tree. Hannibal and Will are in the open sun, right up against the wire.

"They each bring their own entertainment," Hannibal replies, and smiles at him. "I suppose, if I must pick one, I would pick dressage."

Will huffs. "Of course you would."

"Oh?"

"The elegance, the precision. You're kind of a control freak, has no one told you that before?"

Hannibal laughs, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "Never to my face, except for Mischa," he says warmly.

Will flushes. "I must be special, then."

"Oh, Will, of course you are."

Will shivers, his blush darkening, and he breathes in deeply.

Hannibal sighs, and turns away, his eyes on the jump. "What's wrong?" Will asks.

"Nothing," Hannibal replies, and before Will can call him out on it, he sighs again, and adds; "I'll admit, since this morning, knowing what I know now, I find it terribly painful, not to openly acknowledge how I feel about you."

Will swallows. "I'm sorry."

"I understand why," Hannibal replies, and his humor has returned, and he gives Will another fond smile. "But I also feel I'm not wrong in saying that there does exist some kind of… inciting incident. A moment or achievement that will justify our relationship, in your eyes."

Will's brows lift.

"You're not so innocent yourself, when it comes to needing control," Hannibal says. His tone isn't scolding – he sounds delighted by it. "You believe in thorough preparation. It's admirable, and essential for a competition. So I'm simply wondering what you have prepared for, when it comes to our relationship."

"I just don't want it to look like you're giving me all these gifts and promotions because we're sleeping together," Will replies, even though they haven't slept together, and only just acknowledged that there is something more than a professional relationship between them. "I need to…prove myself, I guess."

Hannibal hums.

"Beverly almost bit my head off when I told her."

Hannibal blinks, and looks to Will in surprise.

"Come on, Hannibal, I'm sure she's been as dogged to you about it as me. She won't shut up about us getting together." Hannibal blinks again, and tilts his head, and Will swallows. "She hasn't?"

"Not at all," Hannibal says lightly.

Will clears his throat, and looks away.

"If I might ask, what exactly has she said to you?"

"Well." Will swallows, and his fingers curl around the wire, needing something to fidget with. He keeps his eyes on the jump. "She told me you're bi, she told me she thought you were interested in me. When you gave me Red she just got worse about it, I suppose."

"Ah, so your pathological need to prove yourself is not just due to a sense of lowered self-worth."

Will huffs. "I guess."

"I'll admit, that's reassuring."

"Oh?"

"I don't subscribe to the idea that I'm better than you, Will – if Mischa told you about Bedelia and Anthony, you'll know I cannot tolerate that kind of haughtiness." Will hums, and nods, and drops his gaze. "I come from greater privilege, and had the opportunity for more organized learning, but it's unfair to equate that with being 'better'."

Will sighs. "I agree," he replies. "I guess I just don't want to have to deal with people… looking at me like that." He swallows, and meets Hannibal's eyes. "Or you."

Hannibal's gaze is dark, heavy with understanding. "I wish the world wasn't the way it was," he says gently, "but I understand why. So, I'll ask again – is there anything that could happen that would change your mind? Something I could help with?"

Will lets out a heavy breath through his nose, and lifts his shoulders in a helpless shrug. The motion tugs on them, makes them ache sharply, and he says, "I don't know." Hannibal sighs as well. "But I think taking Red to the puissance competition, if we do well…. That'll help."

Hannibal's eyes brighten, shining redder in the sunlight. He smiles. "I'm sure you'll do wonderfully, Will," he says. "When we get home, train hard, and trust him." Will nods. "I don't think he wants to let you down, either."

Will swallows, and looks away again, blushing deeply. He's warm in the sun, or maybe that's just being so close to Hannibal, under the weight of his gaze. "I want to make it perfectly clear that I don't have a problem with…being with you. It's the public aspect I'm hesitant about."

"I understand," Hannibal says, and Will nods to himself. That's that.

He startles, as a horn blares to the side of them, and Hannibal straightens. "The first rider is starting," he says, and Will nods, breathless with anticipation. Hannibal steps closer to him, and the other spectators come out from their shade and join them, flanking on either side.

The first rider appears a few minutes later, a woman astride a powerful-looking black stallion. The animal's flanks are already shining with sweat, and he takes the hill like he has a personal

vendetta against it, spit flying around his mouth from champing at the bit. Will can see the woman's face is tight with strain, trying to keep him controlled.

The stallion leaps at the table, crests it, takes a stride, and drops down to the other side, heading to the ravine. Will's exhale is heavy with relief – he doesn't want to see anyone fall, of course not; tripping over that kind of jump could prove deadly.

"What happens if they fall?" he asks Hannibal.

"If the rider falls, they are automatically eliminated from the competition," Hannibal replies, and nods to a single man standing on the other side of the course, so that he can see both the table and the ravine, a clipboard in hand. "If the horse stumbles, and recovers, the only penalty is time lost from lack of momentum, provided the horse's shoulders or hindquarters do not touch the ground." Will nods. "If they do, they are required to retire from the course and will only get the score they earned so far. Refusals and penalties are calculated after."

Will nods again, and falls silent as another horse appears at the top of the hill. It's another woman, astride a Percheron mare, her dappled coat standing out starkly amidst the greens of the field. She slows the horse down dramatically as the mare approaches, her ears cocked forward and wrapped in a protective cover to stop flies or dirt getting into them. The horse whinnies sharply, tossing her head, and climbs in a rather ungainly way onto the high table, trots to the other edge, and drops down.

Will winces.

"Not enough confidence," Hannibal says in agreement.

The gathered crowd fall back into their chatter, and then Will hears Beverly calling for them, and she jogs up, flushed and bright-eyed. "There you guys are!" she says. "Francis is just about to start."

"Aren't there two more ahead of him?" Will asks, frowning.

She shakes her head. "Fourth in line had to bow out, her horse fell during the warmup and one of his forelegs is all jacked up." Hannibal's lips purse in displeasure, and Will's frown deepens, wondering how the Hell that could have happened. He hopes the animal is okay. "Third should be coming any second now."

Will nods, and looks to the hill, finds a man cresting the rise astride a dainty little skewbald. His brows rise, because the horse doesn't look like it could take a normal showjumping ring, let alone a monster like the table jump. Of course, size isn't everything, but Will's been spoiled by Red.

The horse takes the first part of the table, but stumbles, clearly not anticipating the high rise. Will winces as the man tightens his reins and sits low in his seat, and the horse manages to get his legs under him, tossing his head, eyes rolling. He coaxes the horse to the end of the table, and they drop down on the other side and spring into a gallop for the ravine.

Will huffs. "The more I look the more worried I get for Bonnie and Francis."

Hannibal smiles.

Beverly worms her way to the wire on Will's other side, and gives him a wide, knowing smile. Will rolls his eyes and hopes he manages to convey that she needs to keep her damn mouth shut with just a look. She huffs, but subsides.

Francis is next, and he leads Bonnie to the top of the hill, and slows her for a moment, weaving her to the side in a little side-trot like he did in the dressage. Will tenses, watching Bonnie for any signs of uncertainty, any hesitation – anything on Francis' face that would give away that he's worried. He sees nothing of the sort.

Then, Francis smiles, and kicks her on. Bonnie canters down the hill assuredly, and takes the jump as cleanly as Will thinks is possible. He smiles as he watches them go on, towards the ravine, and take that jump too.

Hannibal lets out a soft, happy rumble. "Wonderful," he purrs.

"Wouldn't stopping mean he loses time?" Will asks, as they all turn away from the wire, freeing up a space. Hannibal leads them confidently, back towards the tent at the beginning, which Will sees is also the end, as that same big black stallion gallops through the final stretch and across the finish line.

"Yes," Hannibal replies with a nod. "But a time penalty for hesitation, or refusals, or a fall, is a much higher price to pay than taking a moment and making sure your animal knows what they're getting into." He gives Will a smile that holds more than one meaning. "Sometimes waiting for the right moment is better than rushing headlong and suffering the consequences."

Will blinks at him, and his throat is too tight to answer.

Beverly waves to Mischa, who is also standing by the finish line, chattering animatedly to a large, grey-bearded man. Hannibal lets out a quiet sound of surprise as they approach. "Signore Pazzi," he greets, and shakes the man's hand. "I didn't know you would be here today."

"I needed some sun," the man replies, grinning wide. He has an Italian accent, light enough to suggest he has spent quite some time in America and lost much of it. "And how could I possibly not say 'Hello' to little Mischa?"

Mischa giggles, and bounces in place. "Anthony told me you trained the filly he means to perform with today," Hannibal says.

"Yes. She's a fine thing," Pazzi replies with a nod. "I do hope you will be watching. I have not seen you gathering new horses for some time now, Hannibal! Why is this?"

Hannibal laughs. "I think those people are the same who wish I would slip quietly into retirement."

Pazzi grins, and his eyes rove over the group. "Ah, a new face!" he says, and looks at Will. "Rinaldo Pazzi, a pleasure to meet you."

"Will Graham," Will replies, and shakes his offered hand.

"Will is a new trainer with us," Mischa says when their hands drop. "He is training a new stallion at the stables. Oh, Signore, you must come see when he is ready! The puissance course that is coming up, we will all be there!"

"Puissance?" Rinaldo says, both brows rising high. "A challenging thing. I will be there, of course!"

Will turns when Beverly puts a hand on his arm. "Francis is coming," she says, and they all turn to watch. There is a single jump before the finish line, and Bonnie is running towards it. It is a simple wall jump, not terribly high, but Will imagines after running for so long and with so many daunting obstacles, she's tired.

She clears it, through her back feet clip the tip of it, nudging one of the foam pieces, but it does not fall. Then, Francis rises from the saddle and spurs her on, and she gallops to the finish line and straight through it. Will grins, watching as Francis immediately slows her and lets her rein go long, lets her bow her head and walk on quivering legs.

He leads her past the tent, to where there is a large paddock where other entrants are waiting to start, and a finishing section where horses can rest. Will walks over, leading the pack, as Francis dismounts. He dips under the fence and goes to him.

"Here," he says, and fishes from his pocket a bread roll he snagged from the breakfast buffet. Francis blinks at him in surprise, but takes it gratefully, tearing off half and chewing so that one of his cheeks bulges widely. "That was a good run."

Francis nods, and pats Bonnie's shoulder fondly. Bonnie shakes out her mane and lips at the grass beneath her feet, her rein wrapped loosely around Francis' forearm. "She did a good job," he says, soft with affection. He straightens, and swallows his mouthful, taking another as Hannibal approaches him.

"Well done," Hannibal says, and claps their forearms together. He eyes the bread roll, and smiles widely as Francis finishes it. "Are you feeling alright?"

"Will brought it," Francis says. "I'm good, but I appreciate it."

Will blushes at the utterly surprised, adoring look Hannibal sends his way.

"Come, let's give her some rest and make sure Pergalė is ready for her show," he says kindly. Francis nods, looping Bonnie's reins over her neck and head, and gathers them, leading her towards the back of the paddock as the person who rode after him trots in. They walk to the stables and Francis begins to untack Bonnie.

Pergalė puts her head over her stall, flattening her ears at the presence of so many people she doesn't like. She stomps the ground impatiently. "Oh, behave yourself!" Mischa chides, tapping her nose. She snorts into her hand, ears going forward. "Hannibal, I think I will leave after today is done."

Hannibal nods. "We can help you with the trailer."

"I will go with you, if I may," Rinaldo says. "I would like to see what you have been doing with yourself since last we met!"

"Of course," Hannibal says with a smile. Will bristles, inwardly, at the idea of Rinaldo seeing Red when Will isn't there. He swallows it back. "Miss Katz, would you be so kind as to accompany them, and drive the trailer back tonight?"

"Sure!" Beverly chirps. "Then Will can take the second bed in my room."

Will freezes, and looks at her. She raises a brow in challenge.

He swallows. "…Sure," he says, shifting his weight. "I can't think of a reason why not."

Hannibal is silent, and he meets Will's eyes, and then nods. "Of course," he replies, and Will can't help feeling a little disappointed that he gave up so quickly. But, he tells himself, there will be other chances. There must be. "Come," Hannibal adds, recovering quickly, "let's get good seats for the dressage course."

Will nods, and glares at Beverly, as they fall into step behind him, walking towards the arena. She winks right back.

"It's for the sake of your shoulders," she whispers to him. "I'm just looking out for you. Unless there's a reason why you'd rather stay in *Hannibal's* room."

"Fuck you," he hisses, but he knows he's been caught. Beverly laughs.

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

please note the new tags and rating!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Unlike Francis' performance in the dressage competition, and every one that Will has seen since, Mischa performs in complete silence. She walks Pergalė into the ring, the mare's mane braided in an intricate series of twists and knots that make it appear as though it is made of rope, her tail the same, bunched up and hanging thickly against her rump. Beneath the shining, sleek black saddle is a saddle pad that covers an inch or so before and behind the thigh pieces, and is the color of old blood – a deep red, shining with gold around the hem. Threads of it have been woven into Pergalė's mane and tail, adding to the sheen of her, and the boots around her ankles are black, and edged with a similar red.

Pergalė stands utterly still while Mischa does her salute to the judges, then turns around on her forelegs to salute to the side, then the back, then the owners' section, where Hannibal, Will, Beverly, and Francis and Rinaldo are. Will doesn't see hide nor hair of Bedelia or Anthony, but Anthony is due to perform shortly after Mischa, so he assumes they are getting ready and going through whatever pre-show rituals they do. Equestrians are as superstitious as surgeons.

Then, she rights herself, and begins her show. There is no music, and in the silence, Will is utterly enthralled. He can hear everything, it seems – the dull thuds of Pergalė's hooves hitting the soft ground, the creak of leather and the stands beneath bodies as people lean in or shift in place. Beside him, Hannibal is utterly still, but Will's heart is rushing in his ears, and he thinks he can hear Hannibal's, too, as they watch his sister perform.

Though Will admits he doesn't have quite the eye for dressage as Hannibal does, or Francis, or anyone else trained in the skill, he can't find a single flaw in Mischa's performance. She rides Pergalė around the ring with effortless mastery, guiding her through extended trots, then a gait so short that Pergalė barely moves forward. It looks like a dance, an elegant glide of horse and rider around the ring.

Will smiles, when he sees Mischa guide Pergalė around, so she's cantering in a tight circle, only her inner foreleg extending through as each foot completes the four-step pace. Hannibal's knee nudges his, and Will's fingers curl, so he doesn't reach out to touch.

The performance ends, and Hannibal claps loudly, straightening in his seat as Mischa does a bow, and then Will grins as he watches Pergalė toss her head, and extend a foreleg, other leg dipping so that she bows as well, as Will taught Red to do. The sight brings with it a pang of longing – he misses Red dearly, and will be glad to be going home tomorrow.

Mischa walks out of the ring, Pergalė's tail tossing heavily as they disappear from sight, and Hannibal sighs. "Wonderful," he says, his eyes shining with pride.

"Little Mischa is all grown up!" Rinaldo says. He is sitting on Hannibal's other side – Francis is beside Will, and Beverly is sitting on the end again in case she needs to use the bathroom. In the small susurrus brought on by waiting for the next performer, Francis takes a little bag of candied almonds from his pocket, opens them, and starts to eat. Will grins at him, and takes one when it's offered.

"Your initial instruction to her has proven invaluable," Hannibal says with a fond smile. "Perhaps I can persuade you to rejoin us, when your contract comes up for renewal. Unless you are not bound to any stable now?"

"Oh, Hannibal, you sneaky devil – you know I cannot possibly abandon Signore Dimmond just as the season starts," Rinaldo says, though his smile is somewhat conspiratorial. "Perhaps next summer, though."

Hannibal's smile widens, and he nods. "Of course."

Beverly stands, dusting herself off. "Drinks?" she asks.

"Yeah," Francis says, standing also. "Anyone else?"

"A Pimm's, please," Hannibal says, and hands Beverly a credit card. "And whatever Will and Signore Pazzi desire."

"Just water for me, please," Rinaldo says.

Will shrugs, and looks up at Beverly. "You know what I like," he adds.

She grins at him, wide and knowing. "That I do," she says with a nod, and Will glares at her halfheartedly. She pockets the card and walks with Francis out of the stands, down to the bottom and through the gate separating the owners' box from the main entryway. Rinaldo's phone rings, and he takes it out, giving Hannibal and Will an apologetic look. He stands, and scoots past them, taking the phone call and rattling off a greeting in Italian.

Then, Hannibal and Will are alone, and Will swallows. "Sorry about Bev."

"Oh?"

"Insisting on me moving rooms. I don't…" He lets out a frustrated sound, and rolls his eyes. "I know exactly what she's doing. Being a pain in the ass, as usual."

Hannibal smiles. "Well, at the risk of sounding trite, it's your decision. You don't have to switch rooms if you don't want to."

Will looks at him, and says quietly, "You know I don't want to."

"Then don't," Hannibal says, like it's as simple as that. Maybe it is. After all, what harm is Will really causing, by admitting to Beverly of all people that, yes, there is something going

on between them? She already knows, or at least heavily suspects, and what would Will be doing, except confirming her suspicions?

"If…I did spend the night," he begins, and speaks as quietly as he can. Hannibal's eyes flash. "What would happen?"

"Whatever you wanted to happen," Hannibal replies.

Will nods, pressing his lips together. "I want a lot of things to happen."

Hannibal smiles. "Well, Francis is still in the top ten of the leader board. As a result, he will be performing early, but other than that, we have no pressing matters to attend to." He looks away, to the entrance, and seeing no one they know there, he reaches out and squeezes Will's hand. Just briefly, and he moves away immediately, but the warmth of his touch lingers, a heavy promise that makes Will's fingers flex. "And I can suffer one night without adequate sleep."

Will breathes out heavily, suddenly not tired or sore in the slightest. "Then I'll stay," he murmurs. Hannibal smiles at him, and seems just as eager as Will feels. "I don't care what Beverly thinks. As much of a pain as she normally is, she knows my stance on everything, and she won't go running her mouth."

Hannibal nods. He straightens, as Beverly and Francis return with beverages, one in each hand, and a bottle of water tucked into Francis' arm. They climb the stands and hand everything out, and Beverly got Will another whiskey on the rocks. She's drinking something pink and sweet-smelling, and Will grins at Francis when he smells the cherry Coke that makes up part of his cup.

They settle again. There is another performer in the middle of his routine, so they are silent, watching, through Will can tell it is with much less interest than they watched Mischa or Francis. Then, it's twelve-thirty, and Anthony walks into the ring astride a little grey mare. She has some dappling along her hindquarters, and her muzzle and lower legs are darker than the rest of her. Rinaldo returns, and scoots awkwardly back into place, taking the bottle of water with a grateful sigh.

Anthony's music starts with a fast-based riff of an oboe, and he kicks the mare into a trot, matching her strides with the music effortlessly. The melody joins in soon after, a chorus of violins that Will suspects was redone to cover up the lyrics, in a low and minor harmony as he leads her in a ring around the outside. The mare looks a little jittery, her head held much too stiff in a regal arch, her legs kicking out farther than Will has noticed other horses do, when performing the stilted trot.

A series of clicks join the music, at a counter rhythm, and Anthony nudges the mare into a canter, sideways at a slant across the ring, and then back the other way. The song goes to silence for a moment, and then he leans in, in a circling canter, around her hindlegs as Mischa had done, and Will has seen before. He can tell that the mare is young, and untried, for she keeps tossing her head, trying to get her mouth free and her neck to relax, and Anthony's knuckles are white around her reins.

He grunts, shifting his weight, and glares down at the pair. "He needs to let her relax a little bit," he says darkly.

Hannibal hums in agreement, his knee nudging Will's again until the pretense of getting more comfortable in his place. "Do you see the rein leading from her chin to her girth strap?" he asks, and Will nods. "Riders will put that on horses if they have a penchant for bucking."

Will's frown deepens.

"She is prone to flights and startling," Rinaldo says lightly, though Will can see he is looking at them with similar concern. He sighs, and rubs a hand over his mouth. "I don't think he worked her enough."

Will huffs. The song ends, and Anthony brings her up sharply to a halt, unbuckles his chin strap and lifts his hat in a salute, before he turns and trots her out of the ring. Will sighs, and rests his elbows on his knees, and spots, at the entrance to the owners' box, Bedelia's golden hair and bright blue dress.

They all stand, heading that way, and Will hangs back behind Hannibal, with Beverly and Francis, as Hannibal and Rinaldo approach Bedelia and offer kind smiles and friendly handshakes. "A fine introduction," Hannibal says mildly.

Bedelia's lips purse, and she looks sourly to the archway through which Anthony left. "I suppose," she says idly. "I don't know if there is a future for the horse, though."

Hannibal hums. "Perhaps you would consider selling her to me, then."

Bedelia's brows lift, and she tilts her head. "Oh?"

"I've been contemplating expanding my stock to allow for smaller mounts, friendlier horses for children or young adults. How is her temperament?"

"She's quite wild," Bedelia says sharply. "I don't think she would suit."

Hannibal smiles. "I leave it to your discretion, but you know how to reach me should you change your mind."

She nods, and with that, they leave, though Rinaldo stays behind. Hannibal leads the way, Will and Francis and Beverly in tow, and he sighs, squinting up at the bright sun. He leads the way to the stables, where Mischa and Pergalė are already inside, as Mischa is brushing her down and unbraiding her hair. She grins when Hannibal approaches, and leaves the stall so that they can embrace.

"You did wonderfully, Mischa," he tells her, and kisses her forehead. "Signore Pazzi is inside with Bedelia – when you are ready, feel free to take the trailer and go home."

She nods. "I'll stay and help," Francis says, and Beverly nods.

"Excellent," Hannibal replies. "Have a good day, everyone."

He leaves, and Will follows. They head back outside, and walk with no real direction, though Will notes that Hannibal is heading vaguely back towards the car. He sips his whiskey, feeling the burn of it warm his chest and belly, and Hannibal sighs and discards his empty cup in one of the plastic bags designated for trash.

"The cross-country event will still be going on," Hannibal tells him. "And there are many other entrants for the sister dressage performance. Would you like to stay and watch?"

Will eyes him. "Up to you," he says mildly, and finishes his drink, discarding the cup as well.

Hannibal hums. "How is your shoulder?"

"It aches like a bitch, but I'm good," Will replies.

Hannibal nods. "The salve is still at the hotel," he says, and Will arches a brow. "Perhaps, if you are willing, we could retire there for a time, until dinner."

Will smiles, widely. Hannibal doesn't have it in him to be subtle, he thinks, and laughs to himself at the mental image of both of them, sneaking off like teenagers to go do some things in private that their parents would not approve of in the slightest.

"Sounds good to me," he purrs, and Hannibal's dark eyes flash with anticipation. He smiles, and nods, and leads the way to his car. They get in, and drive to the hotel.

Will doesn't waste any time once they're inside. The door closes, and Hannibal sets the key down, and Will approaches him, cupping his face and kissing him deeply. Hannibal growls in answer, grabbing Will's hips tightly, urging him closer.

Will sighs, allowing himself to be guided, until Hannibal has him against the bed, and he sits on it, pawing gracelessly at Hannibal's riding jacket, unbuttoning it and pushing it off his shoulders to fall to the floor. Hannibal kisses him again, worming one thigh between Will's knees, bows over him so Will lies flat.

"How do you want to do this?" Will asks, gasping as Hannibal unbuttons Will's coat, and Will fights his arms free so he can keep grabbing. "You or me?"

Hannibal smiles, widely. His cheeks are flushed, his eyes bright, and Will slides his hands up to Hannibal's hair, ruffling it until it slides thin and soft between his fingers.

"Eventually, both," he replies, and climbs onto the bed, straddling Will's hips. Will gasps, groaning at the heat and pressure of Hannibal against his hardening cock, the strong and sure grip of his thighs. Hannibal reaches down to unzip his boots, kicking them off, and rises only briefly to do the same to Will, until they are back in the same position, farther up the bed, so Will can grip his hips and plant his heels, grinding upward. "If you're alright with that."

"I'm more than alright with that," Will growls, moaning as Hannibal kisses him again, large hand flattening on the nape of Will's neck, holding him upright as Will begins to unbutton Hannibal's shirt, needing desperately to know how he feels against Will's bare hands. He manages to get the halves apart, and smiles when his hands flatten on Hannibal's chest, through the thick, curling hair spread out there.

Hannibal kisses him again, his breath escaping him in a breathy growl as Will spreads his hands out wide, relishing the heat of him, the obvious strength. His teeth sink into Hannibal's lower lip and Hannibal growls again, rearing back, and shoves Will flat again, rolling his hips. Will's lashes flutter, his chin tipped back as he feels Hannibal's warmth press heavily against his cock.

"*Fuck*," he whispers, and Hannibal grins at him, pleased and wide. He sheds his shirt and Will grabs for him, pushing at the hem of his soft leggings, until he can reach below Hannibal's underwear and wrap a hand around his cock.

It's so warm, and hard, leaking at the tip, and Will shivers as Hannibal sighs, jaw flexing as he grinds into Will's hand. Will pulls him out, wrapping his hand tight around the shaft, gasping as Hannibal thrusts into his hand, his grip slackening around Will's ribs, eyes closing, head bowing forward.

Will bucks up, suddenly, sending Hannibal to his back on the bed, sinking between his thighs and tightening his hand, his other flattening on Hannibal's chest to keep him down. Hannibal's eyes open wide, his lips parted in a gasp that Will leans down to swallow. He arches up into Will's touch, hands sliding big and wide up Will's flexing back.

Will moans, rutting fiercely between Hannibal's thighs, twisting his hand so that he can thumb at the foreskin of Hannibal's cock, through the heavily-leaking slit, in love with the way Hannibal shivers and tenses beneath him. He imagines taking Hannibal, just like this, making him writhe and heave beneath Will. It's a decadent thought, and makes his mouth water, and he moans when Hannibal kisses him again.

He's just begun a slow, torturous rhythm, edging Hannibal closer and closer, so that he shows his teeth more often and his nails turn sharp and digging, when there's a knock at the door.

He freezes, and lifts his head, tilted to listen. Hannibal presses his lips together, sighing heavily, and meets his eyes. "Housekeeping?" Will suggests, hopes – but no, the bed had been perfectly made, the room cleaned. They've already come and gone.

Hannibal shakes his head, and Will pulls back, letting him rise and correct his clothes. His cock makes an obscene tent in his leggings, and he grabs his shirt and shrugs it on, buttoning it lazily and leaving the first few undone. He runs a hand through his hair, and goes to the door as the knock sounds again.

Will huffs, shifting up higher on the bed so he's not immediately in line of sight – it could be Mischa, needing help with the trailer, or Rinaldo wanting to discuss horses over wine or whatever. He listens as Hannibal opens the door.

"Bedelia," Hannibal says, and sounds surprised. Will tenses, growling low under his breath. What the *fuck* is she doing here?

"Hello, Hannibal," she replies. Will can imagine her now, smiling and purring, leaning into him. Probably appreciating Hannibal in his state of half-dress. Will's upper lip twitches. "May I come in?"

"I regret to say that no, you cannot," Hannibal says. Not exactly cold, but definitely leaving no room for argument. "How can I help you?"

"I wanted to discuss the subject you brought up at the competition," Bedelia says coolly. "Acquiring horses of mine. I have a few that I think would be more…suited to your tastes." Will rolls his eyes, forces himself not to move, to give away that he's inside. His eyes fall to both their pairs of boots, to their jackets, discarded on the floor. Definitely in plain sight, if she cared to look. He hisses under his breath and his fingers flex. "Perhaps when you are not indisposed, I could convince you to pay us a visit and have a look."

"A generous offer," Hannibal says, and though his tone is still not exactly friendly, Will knows he is pleased for the offer. "And one I am more than happy to accept. If you're available, Will and I will visit on Monday."

"Will?"

"Yes." Will smiles, feeling warm at the idea of going with Hannibal, being by his side when they appraise these horses. Being with Hannibal, obviously there as a show of Hannibal's faith in him, and a further barb at Bedelia's pride. "I trust his judgement as much as my own."

Bedelia hums. Will imagines her lips pursed sourly, her brows arched. Imagines her looking behind Hannibal, as if Will might spring from the bed and reveal himself. He won't, but oh, just to see the look on her face would be worth it.

"Monday, then," Bedelia says coldly.

"I'll see you then," Hannibal says, and as the door closes, Will rises from the bed, because he doesn't want Hannibal thinking about her. Doesn't want him thinking about anyone except Will.

As Hannibal turns, Will pushes him against the door, kissing him fiercely. Hannibal had managed to calm himself down that his erection is no longer obvious, but his cock hardens again as soon as Will presses close, and Will growls, cups Hannibal's nape and squeezes tightly.

"You'd really take me with you?" he breathes, though he knows better than to doubt Hannibal now.

And, as if knowing Will's thoughts as well, Hannibal simply answers; "Yes."

Will smiles, warm and shivering, and bites his lower lip. Slides his hands down, to grip Hannibal's hips.

Sinks to his knees in a graceful motion, and his smile widens when Hannibal gasps, touches his jaw, tilts his head up.

"Good," he purrs, and takes Hannibal out again, stroking his cock and smearing his fingers with leaking precum. He parts his lips, tilts his head, and swallows Hannibal down, and Hannibal growls, thighs tensing and hips arching to get deeper, his eyes closing and his head tipping back.

Will pulls off, and makes a sharp sound. "Watch me," he demands, and Hannibal's eyes open again, and he stares down at Will as if seeing him for the first time. "I like it when you watch me."

Both of Hannibal's hands thread through his hair, fisting tightly, and Will lets himself be pulled back to Hannibal's cock, lets his mouth part wide around the thick, warm flesh. Lets Hannibal's precum coat his tongue as he sinks down, throat tight and tense around the head, tongue pressing flat as Hannibal moans, shuddering, and starts to lazily thrust.

Will sighs through his nose, tilting his head so Hannibal can fuck deeper, bruising his lips and clogging the back of his throat. He tightens his lips around the shaft, sucks as hard as he can when he's given room and air to do it, breathing heavily, hands cupping Hannibal's strong thighs to encourage him to keep going.

A sound escapes Hannibal again, a snarl and Will's name mixed together, and Will lifts his eyes, watches as Hannibal's nostrils flare, his jaw clenches. His cock twitches in Will's mouth and Will moans, sinking as deep as he's able, hoping Hannibal gets the idea.

He does – he groans, tipping his head back again, his fingers flexing in Will's hair as he goes still, leaving Will to take over as he starts to come, flooding Will's mouth. Will swallows quickly – no matter how much he enjoys this, the taste always leaves a little to be desired. He pulls back until only the head is in his mouth, dragging his tongue over Hannibal's slit to get the last of it, and Hannibal shivers, his stomach sinking in, thighs tensing again as he fights to keep himself upright, shoulders braced heavy against the door.

When he's finished, he releases Will, and Will pulls off with a gasp, nuzzling Hannibal's hip as he catches his breath. He rises, and wraps his fingers around the back of Hannibal's neck, kissing his jaw, his cheek – some men don't appreciate sharing the taste, so he doesn't force it, but then Hannibal grabs his hair again and turns his head, meets Will for another desperate kiss and licks brazen and deep into Will's mouth.

They part with another gasp, and Hannibal pets through his hair, gazing at him like Will put the stars in the sky. He grabs for Will, pulling him closer, and Will smiles, happy to be petted as Hannibal recovers.

"Will," Hannibal breathes, and Will's smile widens, he nuzzles happily at Hannibal's neck, sliding his hands down to fix Hannibal's clothes. He shivers, when Hannibal's hand brushes his own erection through his pants.

He shakes his head, pushing it away. "Later," he promises, and Hannibal's eyes flash, his brow creases. Will smiles. "I want you thinking about it all day, wanting it." *Wanting me*. He

doesn't say it, but Hannibal's eyes darken, and he smiles in the way that only shows in his iris.

"You are a cruel man," he purrs, and Will laughs, and doesn't deny it. Hannibal cups his face and kisses him, and Will leans into it, flattening his hands on the door, allows himself a single moment of pressure before he pulls away.

"The worst," he replies. Hannibal smiles, and shakes himself off, straightening. He runs his hands through his hair, flattening it out, and rolls his shoulders. The day is still relatively young, and they have a lot of time to kill before dinner, but Will wants this – he wants to wait, wants to know what Hannibal is like when driven mad with desire.

He goes back to the bed, straightens their boots and grabs their jackets, laying Hannibal's on the rumpled bedsheets as he puts his on. "Let's go back," he suggests, and Hannibal's brows rise, as he finishes buttoning his shirt, tucks it back in, and sits to put his boots on. "People will talk if we stay in here all day."

Hannibal huffs a laugh. "God forbid," he says. "Though you are potentially submitting yourself to a lot of forced socialization. I imagine Bedelia and Anthony especially will be more interested in meeting you, now."

Will rolls his eyes, and nudges Hannibal's shoulder. "I trust you to protect me," he says, and Hannibal smiles up at him, fond and sweet. How could Will not kiss him, when Hannibal looks at him like that? "Come on, Sir," he purrs, and Hannibal's eyes flash, his cheeks darkening. Will grins, and touches his cheek gently. "Let's go rejoin the wolves."

Hannibal nods, and waits for Will to put his boots back on, both of them checking that they don't look too out of order, and he takes Will's hand, squeezes it, and grabs the room key. "Lead the way, Will."

Chapter End Notes

I forgot to beforehand, but this is the song Francis performs to: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VdeDCm3Xu3Q and Anthony: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6cq0zUXcELM

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

/announcer voice
and now, the moment you've all been waiting for.....

The day remains wonderful and warm throughout, and even though Will's thoughts continue to doggedly turn to the moments he and Hannibal shared in the hotel room, as well as the night that promises to follow, he manages to enjoy himself and pay attention enough to realize, once the sister competition is over, that Mischa finished in fourth place.

Hannibal eyes the board, and nods to himself. "She will be pleased with that," he notes.

Will smiles. "Anthony's not even in the top twenty."

Hannibal doesn't reply with words, but the look on his face tells Will all he needs to know.

They meander back to the table jump, which has a much thinner crowd around it now, and Will guesses only a few competitors are remaining. Hannibal checks his phone as they go. "Mischa and Signore Pazzi are on their way home," he tells Will. "Apparently Miss Katz decided to join them."

Will presses his lips together. "Do you think they'll make it back for dinner?"

Hannibal checks the time, his lips pursing. "Doubtful," he replies. "I wouldn't be surprised if Miss Katz decided to stay the night at her home, and journey back in the morning, unless Rinaldo insists on coming back."

Will raises a brow. "No one to check my alibi tonight, then," he says with a grin.

Hannibal laughs with him. They fingers brush, just for a moment, and then release, and Will sees Francis standing underneath the shade of the large tree by the spectators, leaning against it and in deep conversation with a dark-skinned woman, who is speaking animatedly, with a long pink and white summer dress and gold around her wrists and neck. There is a long white cane, red at the tip, leaning between them, and the woman has a dog with a yellow service vest sitting at her feet, panting in the warm air.

"Francis is making friends," Will says, and nods their way.

Hannibal follows his gaze, and smiles. "Good," he says, and they stop a little ways away, so that Francis can choose to acknowledge them or ignore them as he sees fit. "I often worry for Francis – he is a solitary creature, prone to isolation and often preferring the company of horses to other people."

"I think we all have that in common," Will says. Then he pauses, and adds; "Did you worry about me, then? Bev told you about my dogs."

Hannibal smiles at him. "I would like to meet them, if they're friendly," he murmurs. "Perhaps you can show me all the tricks you've taught them, too."

Will smiles, blushing, his fingers flexing because they both know how much Will likes being *watched*. "I'd like that," he replies.

His attention is caught by the appearance of a horse and rider, and he straightens, earning Hannibal's eyes that way as well. The rider is a young man, barely out of his teenage years if Will had to guess, and he's astride a large stallion, the animal black, with the familiar broad face and wavy hair of Friesian blood. It must be mixed, for its legs are slender and lacking feathers, but Will can tell it's a powerful animal, and tosses its head when the rider slows him, letting him look at the jump, before they careen down the hill and take the table easily. Will joins in the polite applause that begins from the rest of the audience, watching the horse disappear into the ravine.

He presses his lips together. "What did Bedelia mean, when she said she had horses suited to your 'tastes'?"

Hannibal huffs, his eyes lifting in a brief roll that surprises Will to see, but makes him smile nonetheless. "One of the reasons she and I parted ways was our opinion on what kind of animals we should be taking in and training," he tells Will. "She has no patience for the 'difficult' horses, and would not even consider any that were not from certain tiers and bloodlines. I like the challenge, and have less concern for past accolades."

Will hums in question.

"I think it's safe to say that, yes, there is something to be said for reputation, but newcomers are just as capable of stealing the show."

Will nods, flushing at the meaningful look in Hannibal's eyes. "Red's from Secretariat's line," he replies. "One could argue he's already a born champion."

"A fortunate coincidence, but that swayed the Vergers' decision to buy him, not mine."

Will nods again, and startles when he feels a snuffling, a wet nose poking behind his knee. He turns to see the service animal sniffing his boot, tail wagging, his harness in the woman's hand, and Francis at her side. He smiles in greeting.

"Will, Hannibal, I'd like you to meet Reba McClane," Francis says, and gestures to the woman at his side. She smiles at them, her eyes unfocused, of course, and settled at some point around Will's ear. "Reba, this is my boss, Hannibal Lecter, and Will Graham, a fellow horse trainer."

"Pleased to meet you," Reba says. Francis is holding her cane for her, so she can extend her hand. Hannibal shakes first, and then Will, and she takes her cane back, letting it rest against her foot.

"And you, Miss McClane," Hannibal replies, at once the charming and polite man he normally is around strangers. The dog apparently finishes his inspection of Will's boot, and sits, panting. He's a sleek animal, golden-furred, some kind of retriever mix. Will resists the urge to pet him, because he's a service animal and clearly at work. "Are you enjoying the competition so far?"

"Oh, yes," Reba replies, smiling widely. "It's the first time I've actually been able to come and relax at a show, though – I'm the events coordinator and usually there's one kind of disaster or another every day."

She laughs.

"I'm glad to hear the world isn't ending," Hannibal says. Will turns, watching another horse and rider crest the hill. There are more people, moving in a crowd, to join watching this jump. Hannibal notices as well. "The competition must be coming to a close."

Francis nods, and there is a moment of silence as the final pair run for the jump. The little mare slows towards the front of it, snorting heavily, and clambers atop it. Will winces, pressing his lips together, but is glad to see the mare trot to the edge, looking down, and leap from the edge, landing with all four legs at the same time. She rears, and is kicked into the canter, and proceeds on her way. The man with the clipboard at the other side of the track notes something down, and walks back towards the finish line, his board tucked under his arm.

"I suppose that's the end of it," Francis says.

"Excellent timing," Hannibal says, checking his watch. "Will and I were just about to go to dinner. Would you both like to join us?"

"Oh, that sounds lovely," Reba says before Francis can answer, and Will watches as he blinks in surprise, and a happy smile breaks out over his face. He nods as well, and Will grins at him, and throws him a wink. It's probably the first and only time he will ever see Francis Dolarhyde blush. "There's a fantastic steakhouse about an hour from here, if you don't mind the drive."

"Wonderful," Hannibal purrs. "Shall we all take one car, or meet you there?"

"If you don't mind dog hair, we can take one car," Reba replies.

"Not at all," Hannibal says, and steps back, gesturing for Francis and Reba to lead the way. Reba nods, and turns, her dog trotting in front of her to make sure she doesn't run into anything, her cane navigating the ground for potholes and loose dirt. Francis walks beside her, and the two immediately fall back into quiet conversation.

Will and Hannibal hang back, giving them their privacy, and Will casts Hannibal a conspiratorial grin. "Who knew you were such a good wingman?" he teases.

"I always believe in making new friends, Will," Hannibal says coolly, though he's smiling in quite a mischievous way. "Though I do hope Francis restrains himself enough to get some

rest, and isn't as tired as I intend for us to be, come morning."

Will stutters, eyes widening, not used to Hannibal being so brazen. He clears his throat and licks his lips, recovering as best he can, and Hannibal is practically beaming with pride to have rendered him momentarily speechless.

Will rolls his eyes, and nudges their fingers together.

The steakhouse is a dimly-lit, intimate affair. The scents of cooking meat, potatoes thick with butter, and candle wax hit Will as they enter and are assigned a table. He and Hannibal take one side, Francis across from Hannibal, and Reba across from Will. They hand them all menus, and this must be a place Reba frequents often, because the server hands her a menu in braille without hesitation. Reba's dog curls up neatly beneath her chair.

They start with water, and wine, which Hannibal selects and orders, before the waiter nods and walks away to fetch their drinks. Beneath the table, Hannibal's knee presses close to Will's, and Will shivers, shifting his weight, and hopes his blush is not too obvious in the low lighting.

"So, Will," Reba begins, her eyes vacantly set in Will's direction. "Should I expect to see your name on the docket next year?"

Will laughs. "I don't think I'm cut out for dressage," he replies. "Do you coordinate a lot of the shows in the area?"

"In the tri-state area," Reba confirms with a nod, and smiles. "My next one is a puissance challenge, just under two weeks away."

"Oh." Will blinks, and looks at Hannibal. "Well, we actually have a horse in that competition. 'Red Morning Star'."

"Oh, yes!" Reba says, clapping her hands together once. "I do remember that name. There was no rider listed at the time – I'm sure there is now."

Before Will can reply, Hannibal nods. "When we entered him, I wasn't sure Will would want to ride him through the course," he explains lightly. "But he and Red have formed quite the bond; I'd be loathe to split them now."

Will smiles.

"Is Red your first charge?" Reba asks.

Will nods, and says, "Yes. Mister Lecter was very generous in offering me the job. I'm excited for the competition."

The waiter returns with their water and wine, and sets the glasses down, and they order their meals. The waiter nods, and takes their menus away, letting them know he will return as soon as the steaks are ready. Francis clears his throat with an apologetic noise, and stands.

"Restroom," he offers in explanation, and they all nod, and he leaves in silence towards the back, where the bathrooms are.

There is silence, for a moment, and then Reba shifts her weight and looks between them. "So how long have you been together?"

Will chokes, leaning over his plate and carefully cupping his glass of wine so he doesn't spill it on his clothes. Hannibal grins, and looks very happy at Will's obvious surprise. Will clears his throat, and washes the knot in his mouth down with water, and rasps; "Why do you say that?"

Reba blinks. "I mean, it's obvious," she says, and Will gapes at her. Beneath the table, Hannibal settles a hand on his thigh, and squeezes once, gently. He lets the touch linger, and Will thinks he might be blushing from head to toe.

He wipes his mouth on his napkin.

"Not long," Hannibal finally replies, saving Will the effort of responding. "And we're trying not to make it public, for now."

Reba nods. "Sorry if I overstepped."

"No, it's fine, it's -." Will swallows again. "What about it is so obvious?"

She grins at them. "I might be blind, but I'm not stupid," she replies with a laugh. "I can hear how people's voices change when they're talking. Yours soften whenever you talk about each other. *And*," she adds with a raised brow, "not to put too fine a point on it, but you guys absolutely stink of each other."

Yep, Will is definitely red all over. He squirms in his seat and Hannibal squeezes his thigh again, preening in delight.

"Well, Miss McClane, thank you for your honesty and insight," he purrs. "We'll be sure not to cause olfactory offense in the future."

She giggles, covering her mouth, and Francis returns, and Hannibal removes his hand from Will's thigh. Throughout the entire meal, Will's leg burns, clinging desperately to the heat of Hannibal's palm, the squeeze of his fingers. Will devours his steak ravenously, suddenly so, so eager to be back at the hotel.

They leave Francis and Reba at the hotel bar, and retire to their room. Will texts Beverly to ask if she's back yet, and receives the 'thumbs down' emoji, as well as a 'Nope! Have fun' and

far more winking faces than Will thinks are strictly necessary.

They go to the hotel room and Will sighs, shrugging off his jacket and hanging it on its hanger in the closet. Hannibal does the same, and sits on the bed to remove his boots. Will remains standing, and runs his hands through his hair.

"Dinner was fun," he says.

Hannibal smiles, and nods. "And enlightening," he replies. Will managed to control his blush by the end of the dinner, but now it returns full force, and he can feel the heat of it on his cheeks. He licks his lips, tasting the wine clinging to them. Hannibal chose a sweet one, a dark red, that stained their mouths and made Will so thirsty.

He goes to Hannibal, then, once his boots are off, and cups his face, kissing him deeply, eagerly licking between his soft lips, his sharp teeth, to claim some of the water in his mouth. Hannibal sighs, soft and wanting, his knees parting to allow Will to step between them. Hannibal bows forward, the kiss turning a little awkward but no less passionate, as Hannibal tugs at the zip of Will's boots and slides them down as far as he can, leaving Will to wriggle and kick them free.

As soon as they're off, Hannibal grabs him, hauling them up the bed, and Will laughs, breaking the kiss to catch his breath as Hannibal rolls Will to his back and straddles his thighs, just as they were before. He leans down, fingers threading and curling through Will's hair, and kisses him again.

Will moans softly, his hands spreading wide down Hannibal's back, admiring the flex of strong muscle, the graceful and perfect arch of it. Hannibal grinds against him, sending fissures of heat down Will's spine, pooling in his belly. His neglected cock starts to harden, as he arches and rolls his hips, seeking Hannibal's weight against it.

Hannibal breaks the kiss, breathing hard, his cheeks pink and eyes black. He moves back, sitting astride Will's knees, and licks his lips, and flattens his hands on Will's hips.

"Let me see," he commands.

Will nods, lifting up to allow Hannibal to dig his fingers around the waistband of his leggings, pulling them down along with his underwear in one smooth motion, before his own body gets in the way. His eyes rake down Will fiercely, ravenously, and his lips part around a low growl as his eyes settle on Will's cock.

Will drops a hand, wrapping his fingers around it, and strokes himself to full hardness, jaw clenching and breath coming in a hiss through his teeth. He's leaking, something he only does when he's really turned on, and uses the little beads of precum on the head of his cock to slick the way.

Hannibal's hand joins his, his head tilts as he presses a thumb at the very base, cups Will's balls and rolls them gently. Will gasps, lashes fluttering, chin tilted up to expose his neck. Hannibal growls, leaning down, and kisses wide and wet over his thrumming pulse.

He breathes in, and his other hand wraps in Will's hair, gently coaxing his head to one side to give his mouth room. Will's neck is sensitive, always has been, and he knows Hannibal can feel how his cock twitches, his thighs tense, whenever Hannibal kisses or licks over the exposed skin.

Hannibal drags his nails down, around Will's nape, and dig into his shoulder. He leans back and hauls Will upright and Will lets go of himself so he can maintain balance, submitting to Hannibal's kiss as his mouth is claimed.

"Get undressed," Hannibal say sharply, roughly, and lets him go to do the same.

Will grins at him. "Yes, *Sir*," he says, and notes with pleasure how Hannibal's eyes flash, his shoulders roll – he likes it when Will calls him that. He gives Will a wide, knowing smile, and they spare but a moment to unbutton and shed their shirts, and the rest of their clothes, before Hannibal is back on top of him, grinding against him bare.

Will breathes out heavily, wrapping his fingers around both of them, stroking slow. Hannibal leaks too, Will knew that already, and the sweat beading on their skin lets the slow drag become slick and wonderful.

Hannibal plants his hands on Will's chest, shoving him down again, and shivers as he rolls his hips, greedy and demanding. His strong thighs grip Will's hips tightly, and Will's mouth waters at the thought of Hannibal bearing bruises in the shape of his hipbones on his thighs by the end.

"Fuck," he breathes, as Hannibal tips his head back, closes his eyes. He reaches up with his free hand and curls his fingers around Hannibal's collarbone, flattens his palm, drags down through his chest hair. "You're so fucking *pretty*."

Hannibal smiles, the blush on his face darkening and spreading, staining his chest. "So are you," he replies, low and sincere; "The most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

Will rolls his eyes, huffing, and Hannibal grins, unrepentant, and leans down for another kiss.

"I suppose it's a stupid question, to ask if you brought anything?"

Hannibal laughs against his lips, and straightens. "The power of positive thinking," he replies, and stands, leaving Will chilled and bereft. He shivers, and sits up, as Hannibal goes to one of his bags, and from a side pocket he pulls out a small sachet of lubricant, and a condom. His brows lift, but he reaches for Hannibal eagerly as Hannibal returns to him.

"I guess I can't really say anything, since it paid off."

Hannibal smiles, and opens the lube, handing Will the condom. Will takes it, opens it, and rolls it on – even that tease of pressure makes him growl, and he wraps his fingers around his shaft, stroking slowly. The condom is lubricated as well, and the scent of it, fake and plastic, covers his mouth.

Hannibal opens his own packet and pours it onto his fingers, taking that wrapper and the condom one and setting it to one side. He leans down to kiss Will, cupping his neck and squeezing, and reaches behind himself to spread the slick there.

Will growls into the kiss, unable to help himself, and paws at Hannibal's ass, spreading him wide, fingers dipping in alongside Hannibal's, to feel how warm and wet he is. He moans when he feels Hannibal work two fingers into himself, bares his teeth against Hannibal's cheek as Hannibal kisses his neck.

"You know -." Will stutters, closing his eyes, as Hannibal wraps his other hand around Will's cock, stroking him achingly slow. "When it's my turn, you can fuck me bare."

Hannibal growls, and puts his teeth to Will's neck in answer.

Emboldened, brazen, Will smiles, and adds; "I want you to. Want you to watch me, after, knowing I'm still sore, still dripping wet."

"*Will*," Hannibal snarls, and rears up, his eyes wild. Will reaches up to knot a hand in his hair, and forces Hannibal's fingers out of himself, smearing the rest on Hannibal's cock so he can stroke it. Hannibal shudders, upper lip twitching to show his teeth. "Oh, you are very cruel, aren't you?"

"There's still time to do this the other way, if you want," Will replies, and he means that.

Hannibal shakes his head. "No," he breathes. "You have teased me for far too long. I want this." Will nods, sucking in another deep lungful of air, tasting Hannibal on his tongue as Hannibal grips his cock, angles it up, and lifts himself so that he can slide forward, gripping Will's thighs like he's a bucking horse. He growls as Will touches him, rolls his hips, and Will gasps as his cockhead meets Hannibal's ass, watches, rapt, as Hannibal's shoulders drop, his head bows so his hair falls forward, shielding his eyes. He reaches up to brush them away.

Hannibal sinks down onto him, and they both let out twin, bastardized sounds of pleasure. For Will, it is a curse and a moan; for Hannibal, Will's name and a sated sigh. He takes Will all the way in smoothly, until Will's hipbones jut into his thighs, and simply rests there for a moment. His ass tightens around Will almost experimentally, testing his girth, his depth. It's all Will can do to remain still and let him get comfortable.

Will runs his free hand up Hannibal's trembling thigh, flattens wide on his hip, his other hand stroking Hannibal slowly, coaxing him into movement. Hannibal's eyes open, and he pushes his hair back from his face, flushed and sweaty and so Goddamn *pretty,* Will can't take his eyes off him. Then, he starts to move, and Will doesn't have a choice.

He tips his head back, groaning softly as Hannibal fucks himself on Will's cock. He rises, almost all the way, and sinks back down with terribly cruel slowness, sighing as he does. Will can't do anything but look, and touch, utterly wrecked already, just feeling Hannibal around him. Even with the condom, Hannibal is tight and warm, grips his cock so nicely.

"*Fuck*," he breathes, moaning as Hannibal begins to move faster, thrusting into Will's grip, which he tightens, thumbing at Hannibal's foreskin as it pulls back, revealing his pink, wet

cockhead. He thumbs at the slit, teases the sensitive spot just below the head, watches in complete rapture as Hannibal rides him.

He reaches up, cups Hannibal's neck, and brings him down to a kiss, tucking his heels against the mattress and fucking up, wanting Hannibal deeper, wanting it harder. Hannibal growls against his lips, all teeth, nips Will's lower one and grips his neck hard enough to leave crescent-shaped nail marks in his sweaty skin. They sting, they ache, they feel fucking perfect.

Hannibal sits back, heavily, blowing out a breath. "How does your shoulder feel?" he asks.

Will grins at him. "I don't care," he replies.

Hannibal smiles, and Will rises, because he knows what Hannibal wants. They roll until Hannibal is on his back, now, and though Will's shoulder twinges and aches, he ignores it in favor of spreading Hannibal's legs wide, of putting one of them over his shoulder and cupping his ass, lifting him into Will's thrusts. He tucks his thighs beneath Hannibal, curls him, and Hannibal gasps, lashes fluttering, moaning as Will apparently manages to find his prostate.

He clenches up around Will so tightly, Will would be afraid of the condom tearing if he wasn't so wet. He fucks in, drives into Hannibal as fiercely as he can, and apologizes to whoever their neighbors are as the headboard thumps steadily against the wall.

Hannibal puts his hand in Will's hair, his other taking over stroking his cock, and kisses Will desperately, gasping so heavily he can't quite seal it. Will licks deep into his mouth, swallowing his filthy, low noises, feeding Hannibal his own. The sound of their bodies colliding is obscenely loud, and when Will puts his mouth on Hannibal's neck and kisses there, he finds Hannibal's heart racing.

Hannibal spasms, his leg wrapping high on Will's back, urging him onward, and Will slows his pace, makes his thrusts hard and deep, angled up to find that sensitive place inside him. With every one, Hannibal gasps, tightening around him, and his nails turn sharp and fierce, dragging down Will's back.

"Yeah," Will growls, closing his eyes. "That's it, baby. Mark me up."

Hannibal snarls in answer, and lets go of his cock, both hands raking down Will's back hard enough to hurt. Will imagines the deep red lines, spreading out on either side of his spine. He groans, stuttering, the tight coil in his belly flaring and spreading out every time Hannibal does it.

"'M gonna come," he breathes, and rears up, letting Hannibal's neck go so he can stroke Hannibal's cock. Hannibal's face tightens, he sighs and tips his head back, but doesn't close his eyes. He wants to watch. Will wants him to watch.

He presses deep, grunting as he lets go, unable to hold back any longer, and floods the condom with a low growl. Hannibal shivers, biting his lower lip, and joins Will in touching himself. Will watches, ravenous to see it, as Hannibal's shoulders curl in, his thighs tremble

and tighten, trying to close. Will shows his teeth and presses them flat. Hannibal reaches out and rakes his nails down Will's chest in answer.

His ass clenches up tightly, bearing down, tighter, and Will smiles, sharp and wide. "Not goin' anywhere, Sir," he purrs. Hannibal's stomach tenses up, his chest heaves with a breath. "Try and force me out all you want."

Hannibal gasps, and arches with another sated groan, spilling thick and wet over their hands, over his belly. Will shivers, thrusting in one more time, relishing the feeling of Hannibal spasming tightly around him, strong muscles gripping like he wants to keep Will inside. He waits, until they lessen, until Hannibal has nothing more to give, and then he pulls out.

He rolls the condom off with a wince, curls it, and throws it with the wrappers in the nearby trashcan. His hand is dirty, and without thinking about it, he lifts his fingers to lick them clean.

Hannibal moans, weakly, and collapses against the bed. "Please, Will, have mercy on me, darling."

Will grins, and pushes himself between Hannibal's thighs again. He takes Hannibal's come-soaked hand, lifts it slowly to his mouth, and sucks his fingers down, tongue snaking out to lick the saddle of his thumb. Hannibal's entire body tenses, his cock gives a feeble twitch, and he stares at Will like he's never seen him before.

He lets Hannibal's hand go once it's relatively clean, and leans down to lick up the mess he left behind on his stomach, too. Hannibal's fingers curl through his hair, and he gasps as Will finishes up, with one last long lick to his softening cock.

Hannibal tugs on his hair, bringing him closer, and they're both filthy and soaked with sweat, Hannibal so warm beneath him, as Hannibal kisses him fiercely, breathless and no less passionate than any other kiss they've shared. Their legs entwine, like he needs to touch all of Will as much as possible. It's a nice feeling.

His hands flatten on Will's shoulders, idly rubbing them, and Will groans, and collapses over him with a sigh.

"They're fine," he protests, weakly, because it feels fucking good. "Really."

"I know," Hannibal says, soft with amusement. "But a performance like that definitely deserves a reward."

Will grins against his chest. "What will you do, I wonder, if Red and I win?"

Hannibal laughs. "I think I'll give you the world," he replies. "*When* you win."

Will huffs, and raises a brow. "The power of positive thinking?"

Hannibal shakes his head, and tucks a sweaty curl behind Will's ear. "Sure," he purrs, and smiles. "Let's call it that."

Chapter 15

Will stirs, muffling a sleepy sigh into his pillow, aware, in slow increments, of several things at once: the delicious ache in his shoulders, with the memories of how it got there; the warmth of the sun, streaking in from the parted curtains and creating a soft line of heat along his shoulders; the weight of Hannibal against him, his arm slung around the other man's waist, Hannibal's bicep acting as a second cushion for his cheek, his breaths puffing softly against Will's hair.

He smiles, nuzzling closer, and stifles a yawn against Hannibal's chest. Listens, idly, eyes still closed, as Hannibal's heart rate picks up, climbing to awareness. His smile widens when Hannibal's hand immediately finds his nape, petting the curling, sticky strands away from his neck and scratching over Will's flushed skin with his nails.

He's exhausted, sated, sore as all Hell, and it was the best night's sleep he can remember having in a while. Hannibal doesn't snore as much as his dogs.

"Good morning, Will," Hannibal says, little more than a rumble, his voice hoarse. He clears his throat and Will lifts his head, watching him wet his lips and lift a hand to wipe the crusts of sleep from his eyes. Will follows suit, delighted when, once he's done, he can press his nose to Hannibal's chest and smell himself stuck in his skin and hair.

"Mornin'," he drawls, and feels another pleased rumble vibrate against his cheek from Hannibal's chest. "What time is it?"

Hannibal pauses, and lifts his head to spy the clock. "Just past seven," he replies. Will groans – far too fucking early, even though back home he's normally out the door by now, on his way to tend to the horses in Hannibal's stables.

He stretches out until his knee pops and the small of his back is that particular kind of weak from unusual labor, and settles with another sleepy sigh.

"Five more minutes?" he asks.

Hannibal's laugh is soft and low, and he turns to kiss Will's hair. "Unfortunately, there's no rest for the wicked." Will huffs, and groans in protest as Hannibal rises from the bed, removing his warmth and the comfort of his body as Will's makeshift pillow. Will huffs against the mattress, and curls up where Hannibal left his heat behind.

He blinks, and finds Hannibal smiling at him in that way that brightens his eyes. "I did tell you we wouldn't get a lot of rest last night," he says, and he sounds very pleased by that. His gaze is heavy with satisfaction, and rakes over Will brazenly. Will returns the favor, admiring the splotches of pink still clinging to Hannibal's chest, the steaks of come dried and shining on his belly, the -.

Will presses his lips together, and sits up. "I think I got a little carried away," he says, and gestures to his own neck. Hannibal blinks, and turns to eye himself in the mirror. There's a

small mark at the hollow of his throat from Will's mouth – low enough that his shirt will hide it, Will is certain, but he can't deny the sight of it makes him warm all over.

Hannibal's thumb drags over the mark, and he smiles, expression melting, for a moment, into one of deep pleasure, before he straightens and schools it. "No matter," he purrs, and meets Will's eyes again. "I certainly won't complain."

Will grins, and tilts his head. "You like it when I mark you?"

"There's a certain poetic justice in it," Hannibal replies, and smiles. His eyes rove over Will again, and he wets his lips. "You aren't exactly unblemished."

Will hums, looking down at himself. He doesn't have any bruises, but his sides have the edges of Hannibal's nail marks, and he's sure his back is scratched to all Hell. He rolls onto his back, delighted by the burn of sensitive skin as he shifts his weight and sinks into the mattress.

Hannibal smiles, and goes to him, stealing a single chaste kiss that renders Will a purring, happy mess, before he rises and goes to the bathroom. He leaves the door open, and Will hears the sink running – no shower. Maybe Hannibal wasn't totally sincere about avoiding 'olfactory offense'. He grins at the thought.

He listens to Hannibal brush his teeth and wash his face, and then he emerges, looking somewhat better-groomed but still distinctively ruffled. His hair is flat, falling in front of his face, and Will's fingers curl, wanting to pet it back. But he resists, in favor of watching Hannibal pull out a fresh set of clothes and lay them on the bed.

"Hey, Hannibal?" Will murmurs, drawing his attention. "I have a thought. A musing, if you will."

Hannibal smiles at him. "Care to share?"

Will presses his lips together, petting his thighs over the blankets still bunched around his waist. He swallows, looking away briefly, to the window, and sighs through his nose.

He meets Hannibal's eyes again, sits up, and reaches for him. Hannibal goes to him immediately, despite his earlier insistence that they had no time to spare, and lets Will pull him back into bed, until they're facing each other, lying on their sides.

Will doesn't fight the urge, now, and brushes Hannibal's hair from his eyes. Lets his touch linger, on Hannibal's jaw, bristly with morning shadow. Down his neck, over the mark he left. He flattens his hand on Hannibal's chest and forces himself to maintain eye contact.

"What if we didn't keep this a secret?"

Hannibal blinks at him – surprised, intrigued. He folds his arm beneath his pillow to prop his head up, and Will swallows again.

"You'd be okay with people knowing?" he asks slowly. His free hand circles Will's, curling beneath his palm. Will traps his tongue between his teeth.

"I'm not suggesting we send out a newsletter or anything," he says, the joke falling flat when Hannibal merely stares at him. "But, I mean, if it's obvious to everyone already then…"

"A few shrewd observations and lucky guesses -."

"That's not my point," Will says, and meets his eyes again. "I just mean, if people knew – it wouldn't be obvious to everyone, not unless we make it obvious. I get that. Beverly suspects, I'm sure Mischa knows." Hannibal's lips twitch into a smile, and he doesn't deny it. Will flushes, and forges on; "If anyone on your payroll gives a crap, they can say it to our faces. But they'd know that it wasn't a case of me…fucking my way to the top, or anything like that."

Hannibal hums, and lifts Will's hand to kiss his knuckles.

"May I ask what changed your mind?" he says quietly.

Will smiles. "You did," he replies, and his smile widens when Hannibal's eyes brighten – it is, Will realizes, a change in expression that seems solely reserved for him. A smile that doesn't alter his mouth, but burns Will all the same. The way his eyes crinkle at the corners, and his body shifts, as if magnetized. "I realized that…the way you look at me, the way it feels when you touch me. I want that all the time. I don't want you to have to hold yourself back. *I* don't want to hold back."

He presses in, because Hannibal is looking at him like he might die if Will doesn't come closer. Will pulls his hand free, and cups Hannibal's face, brushing his thumb over his pink cheek.

"I want everyone to know you're mine."

Hannibal's mouth twitches at the corner, like he wants to snarl, and he lunges for Will, rising from the bed and rolling Will onto his back. Will laughs, only for the sound to turn into a soft moan as Hannibal kisses him, tasting of toothpaste. Will is sure he doesn't taste half as good, but Hannibal kisses him like he doesn't give a damn.

"Will," Hannibal gasps, pulling back and threading his hand through Will's hair. "If you're sure, then yes. I want that, too."

Will smiles, and curls his fingers behind Hannibal's neck, pulling him into another kiss. Hannibal presses against him, greedy and warm and wanting, and Will sighs, closing his eyes as Hannibal pulls back for breath, kissing open-mouthed and wet along his neck.

"You sure we can't stay here a little longer?" he asks, laughing when Hannibal lets out a short, aggravated growl.

"Unfortunately, darling, I cannot control time," he replies, and sounds very put out by that. Will laughs again, and Hannibal kisses the sound away. "But perhaps we can practice efficiency by sharing the shower."

Will blinks, and nods, and grins as Hannibal smiles, and tugs him to his feet, leading him to the bathroom.

Beverly, Francis, and Rinaldo are at the breakfast bar when they finally make it downstairs, clean but no less proper. It takes a half of a second, maybe less, for Beverly to take in Will's tender, bruised mouth, Hannibal's blush, and the single brush of their hands, before she slams her hand on the table and lets out a crow of delight.

"Dolarhyde!" she yells, drawing his attention from where he's piling bread and jam onto a small plate. "You owe me twenty bucks!"

He rolls his eyes, and Will can't even be mad. He pinches her arm and she yelps, swatting him away.

"Awesome – since I won your bet for you, you're buying drinks today."

She grins at him, and puts her chin in her hands. Hannibal huffs, brushing a hand over Will's shoulder, and goes to fetch coffee for them both. "So," she says, stretching the word out far longer than necessary. "I thought *our* room looked pretty *not* slept-in this morning."

Will rolls his eyes, and looks to Rinaldo, but the man seems to be in deep concentration, staring at his phone. Or he's ignoring them. Will doesn't really mind which.

He runs a hand through his hair, and fixes her with a playfully detached look. "Alright, yes, Bev, you're queen of everything and your word is law. Mere mortals like me tremble at your gift of prophecy." Beverly snorts, and is smiling as Francis joins them at the table. He has two plates, now, one piled with bread and jam, the other with eggs and sausage. He blinks at Will, and then Beverly nudges him, and he rolls his eyes again and fishes a twenty from his pocket, handing it to her.

"Victory!" she chirps.

"I hope you realize how creepy it is to be betting on your friend and boss sleeping together."

"Creepy, and *lucrative*," Beverly replies with a wink.

Will huffs, and looks at Francis. "And how was *your* night?" he asks. Francis doesn't look like he got much sleep either.

Francis blushes – that's the second time in two days. Must be a record. "Miss McClane is good company," he replies. "We ended up talking until almost three in the morning, and then I made sure she got back to her hotel safe." Will smiles at him, glad to see Francis look so happy. There's something to be said for the pleasure of good conversation with a pleasant companion.

"Did you get her number?" Beverly demands.

Francis nods, and begins to eat rather determinedly. Beverly has mercy on him, and stands to get some food for herself.

Hannibal returns, in her absence, and hands Will his coffee before taking his seat. Will smiles at him, nudging their knees together under the table, and Rinaldo breaks from his trance and greets Hannibal with a warm smile. "Little Mischa showed me the stables yesterday," he says. "I'm all the more excited to see Red perform."

Will straightens, at the mention of the stallion. "How is he?"

"Restless," Rinaldo replies. Will nods – he will make sure to feed Red lots of mints and let him run as much as he wants, when they get home. "And spirited! A good, strong animal. However did you find him?"

"He was given to us by Mason Verger," Hannibal says. "At first, we were only to train him, but when I saw how capably he performed under Will's hand, I offered to buy him – an offer Mason seemed happy to accept." Will smiles at the warmth in Hannibal's voice, in his eyes, when he looks to Will. "We're very lucky to have him."

Beverly returns, and though Will's stomach is tense with hunger, he waits, not wanting to leave Hannibal's presence so soon. "When do you ride?" he asks Francis, sipping at his coffee.

Francis swallows his mouthful, and checks the time on his phone. "Nine-thirty," he replies. Will nods – it's almost eight now, and they will have to leave soon if Francis is to get Bonnie ready. Hannibal seems to sense this as well, for he finishes his coffee and flags a passing staff member to request some to-go boxes.

Beverly wolfs down her food, and Hannibal smiles when he sees Will snag a bread roll from the buffet, wrap it in a napkin, and stuff it in his jacket pocket, in case Francis needs it later.

Showjumping, Will learns quickly, is the most harrowing event to watch. He listens to Hannibal explain the course, describe the potential pitfalls and mistakes that can be made, and how the course is timed, and any faults – knocked or fallen posts – will count against the time, and that adds up to the final score. Francis is not the first rider; Will is surprised to see it's the youth on the black Friesian mix, who ran second-to-last in the cross-country. Clearly he did well, for he's riding first.

He watches, rapt, as the horse effortlessly takes the first jump, clearing the triple-bar like he's floating on air. Still, Will is tense, and it doesn't feel like he blinks as he watches the man correct the horse's lead leg, turn him, and run him towards the double. First, one step, then the second.

Will breathes out heavily, kneading his thighs. Beverly was sent to get drinks, and though it's far too early for alcohol, he sincerely hopes she returns with some. Rinaldo excused himself

before the event, and so it's just them on the bench seats.

"This is terrifying," Will whispers. And that's just as a spectator – the puissance challenge will be much like it, though with fewer jumps, and Will cannot imagine *riding* a course like this. Everyone watching him, with cameras and big screens for those sitting too far back to see very well.

Hannibal hums, and flattens a hand on Will's back, gently petting down his spine. It's a soothing touch, but does nothing to calm him as he watches the man guide his horse to a mean-looking oxer. The horse clears it, snorting, champing at the bit and stretching his legs out as he canters to the next jump.

The arena is utterly silent, everyone waiting with bated breath, and Will sags when he clears the last without fault or injury. There's a scattering of applause that he joins in, and Hannibal claps as well. Will leans forward, elbows on his knees, and rubs his hands over his face.

In the relative silence that follows, Hannibal gently touches his knee, drawing his attention. "What is it that scares you, about this?" he asks, head tilted, curious.

Will swallows, for he's not quite sure.

"I can…*feel* the crowd," he says, and looks around them, finds most people in quiet conversations, waiting for the next entrant. "Their anticipation, the tension. Up there," he gestures to the ring, "you can't see what's behind you. The crowd will tell you if you mess up, before you even know it happened."

Hannibal nods, and follows Will's gaze to the ring. Another horse has entered, the rider trotting her mare idly around as they size up the jumps and plot out the course. She kicks her horse into a canter, and runs for the first, and Will tenses again, his heart in his throat when the mare nicks the post with her back hooves. It wobbles, but does not fall. He breathes out, his hands shaking.

"Does the potential disappointment of the crowd mean so much to you?" Hannibal asks.

Will swallows, and shakes his head. "Not the crowd," he replies, and hopes Hannibal understands what he means.

He can feel Hannibal smiling at him, and draws his eyes away from the horse and rider, to meet his gaze. "What a strangely contradictory creature you are," he breathes, so quietly Will almost cannot hear him. He leans in, so that he can, and Hannibal's eyes are dark with pleasure, his smile soft. "You were not so uncertain last night, when it was just the two of us."

Will swallows, and fights to control his blush. He's pretty sure he fails. "I don't have to worry about anything else, for that," he says honestly. "I just have to pay attention to you. That's easier."

Hannibal's smile widens, grows very sharp. "Then you can learn to do the same, when you ride," he replies; a soft, unbearably intimate purr. "Let everything else fade away, and focus

only on Red. On me, watching you, and know that no matter the outcome, I will be as proud of you as ever."

Will's fingers curl, tightly, against his thighs. He drops his gaze, and shivers.

Hannibal lets out a quiet, sympathetic sound, and touches one of Will's fists with gentle fingers. "I don't think Red is the only one who's restless," he says, and Will can't help smiling, huffing out a strained laugh. "When we get home, take him out. For as long as you need."

Will nods, and stiffens when Hannibal squeezes his hand.

"And I will be there, when you get back."

Somehow, that thought is what strikes Will the hardest – that Hannibal would let him simply *go*, to run as fast and far as he likes, to work himself into a pliant, sore mess, and still wait up for him, and be there, to soothe and smile and do anything else Will asked of him.

He sucks in a breath, both starved for air and drowning in it, and turns his hand so their fingers can lace. He squeezes, and Hannibal smiles, and squeezes back.

Then, he straightens, his eyes on the entrance to the course. "Francis is up," he says, and Will nods, and follows his gaze, as Francis canters Bonnie into the ring.

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

> we're getting to the end of this fic and it's so fluffy and cute I want to die, I'm gonna miss them /sobs

Will doesn't think he breathes the entire time Francis jumps. They clear the course with flying colors – quite literally, as Bonnie seems very energetic and easily clears every jump. Unlike the others, Will isn't tense with fear or apprehension, though his heart is certainly flying.

No, Will looks at Francis and sees joy – pure, unfiltered pleasure at doing something that's fun. He remembers how fun it is to ride Red, to send him leaping over any and every jump Will puts in his way, and he's smiling as Francis clears the final jump, and joins in the chorus of applause, looking to the scoreboard. Francis has the fastest time by far – he'll keep a good lead, provided no one goes faster than him, although Will doesn't think he'll get first place for the whole weekend.

He exhales heavily, running his hands through his hair, and Beverly returns with their drinks. "Aw, shit, did I miss it?" she complains, awkwardly negotiating the three cups and handing them out before sitting down with a huff.

"He just finished," Will replies, sipping his drink. Just Coke, no whiskey this time. He wets his lips and grins at her. "He did a perfect run."

"Of course he did," Beverly says, as though offended at the suggestion that he would do anything less. Her eyes drop to Will and Hannibal's hands, their fingers still loosely laced on Will's thigh, and her grin widens. "Well I'll go congratulate him and pretend I saw it. You coming?"

"Of course," Hannibal replies, and they all stand, making their way out of the benches and down to the bottom. Will sees Anthony and Bedelia near the entrance leading to the outside, and he and Hannibal had to let go of each other to move, and he fights down the petulant urge to reach for him again.

Anthony smiles at Hannibal, and excuses himself from his group, gesturing to get Hannibal's attention and walking over. "Hannibal, old friend!" he crows, and claps Hannibal on the shoulder. Will swallows, and drinks so he doesn't growl at him. "Your man made a fine go of it!"

"Thank you, Anthony, I think so too," Hannibal replies with a smile and a polite nod.

"Bedelia tells me you're going to be visiting us tomorrow," Anthony continues, and as if pulled by a string, Bedelia appears at the sound of her name. Will sees Beverly's head tilt curiously in his peripheral vision. "Miss seeing what real champions look like?"

It's said in jest, but Will lifts his chin, and though Hannibal's expression does not change from his polite, detached smile, it sharpens, and his eyes flash. "I'd keep an ego like that in check until the rankings justify it," he replies coolly, and Will snorts, hiding his laughter into another drink. "But, yes, I discussed perusing your undesirables. Will and I shall happily take any suitable ones off your hands."

Anthony's brows rise, and his eyes slide from Hannibal, to Will. "Ah, Will Graham, was it?" he asks, and holds his hand out to shake. Will does, noting that Anthony grips him a little tighter than necessary, forces the touch to linger far longer than needed, before he lets Will go. His smile is slick and wide. "Hannibal must have a lot of faith in you, to bring you along."

Will smiles, fighting the urge to bristle at Anthony's tone. Bedelia's eyes are sharp on him, and Will has a habit of speaking out of turn when he gets pissed off, and he doesn't want to say anything that would make Hannibal look bad.

Hannibal, it seems, has no such qualms; "I trust Will's eyes as much as my own," he says, warm and proud. "He has proven remarkably capable, even in as short a time as I've had him training." He pauses, and adds; "Signore Pazzi will be coming with us to the puissance competition the week after next. I insist you come along as well, to watch our latest acquisition's debut."

"Puissance," Anthony repeats, blinking, his face going momentarily lax in surprise. "That's rather daunting for a first timer, wouldn't you agree?"

Hannibal laughs. "It's certainly not dressage," he replies, and Will has to bite his tongue hard not to laugh, as Anthony's cheek color in mild offense. "Now, if you'll excuse me, we must be ready to pack up and leave the event. A pleasure, as always."

He gives them another nod, and turns to leave, Will and Beverly in tow.

Will lets himself grin, then, finishing his drink and tossing the cup into a trash can. Low enough so Beverly can't hear, he leans in and whispers; "You're cute when you're all defensive."

Hannibal smiles at him. "Am I?"

"Mm."

He huffs a laugh, and they say no more as they walk towards the stables, finding Francis brushing Bonnie down and unbraiding the knots of her mane and tail. He turns and grins at them, and his smile widens when Will holds out the bread roll he snagged from the buffet. He eats half of it and offers the rest to Bonnie, who takes it with a delicate lipping from his palm.

"Well ridden," Hannibal praises quietly, in a way that makes Will feel warm all over – to think, some day soon, Hannibal might say the same to him. "I think for the next competition you should focus on your cross-country time. She needs to build up her endurance."

"I agree," Francis replies. He pats the mare's neck affectionately, and Will feels another familiar snuffling at his boot. He turns, grinning when he sees Reba's guide dog, attached to the woman herself. "Reba," Francis breathes, and Will didn't know a man could soften like that so quickly. Francis looks at her like Hannibal looks at him.

"Hi everyone," Reba greets with a warm smile. "Did you just finish?"

Francis lets out a quiet sound of confirmation. "She jumped well," he says with another gentle touch to Bonnie's cheek.

Reba nods, and presses her lips together. "Are you leaving right away?"

"Will and I must return to the stables," Hannibal says before Francis can answer. "I assume Francis will need to stay to see where he ends up being on the leaderboard. Miss Katz?"

"I'll stay too," Beverly says. "Still gotta pack up my room and I can help with the trailer."

Reba nods, her eyes drifting towards the vague direction of Francis' voice. "Then…maybe I could take you to lunch," she says, and Will grins Hannibal's way. Hannibal winks back at him. "Maybe a little premature, but as a congratulations all the same."

"I'd like that," Francis says, and he's blushing *again*. God, does Will look so smitten when Hannibal smiles at him like that? Probably.

"Then we shall be out of your hair without further delay. Well done, Francis – I'll see you when you return."

Francis nods, but his eyes are on Reba. Will, Hannibal, and Beverly leave the stables, heading towards their cars, and Beverly almost walks on top of Will as she catches up and grabs his arm.

"What the Hell was that?" she asks, delighted.

"That was Reba McClane," Will replies, smiling. "We met her yesterday – she coordinates events like these."

"I daresay Mister Dolarhyde is quite taken with her," Hannibal adds lightly, like he wasn't practically pushing them towards each other. He finishes his drink and discards his cup and Beverly does the same. They parked next to each other. "I suppose we shall all pack up our things and head back?"

"Yeah. I'm gonna probably go home after I'm done helping Francis," Beverly says with a shrug. "I have a big ol' bottle of red and a bubble bath calling my name."

Will laughs. "Have fun," he tells her. She grins at him, throwing him another wink, and Will rolls his eyes and gets into Hannibal's car. Hannibal settles a hand on Will's thigh as he pulls

out of his spot, and Beverly follows them out. Will smiles, wrapping his fingers around Hannibal's and lacing them loosely, and they drive on in silence.

The checkout time for the hotel is one in the afternoon, and it's barely eleven by the time they get back and part ways. Beverly shuts herself in her room and Will and Hannibal go to theirs at the end of the long hallway, and Will sighs as the door closes behind them, rolling his shoulders. Hannibal flattens to his back immediately, a soft rumble stuck in his throat as he works his thumbs gently beneath the blades.

Will sighs, dropping his head forward, merely standing and letting Hannibal massage his shoulders for a moment. But then Hannibal presses closer, his arms wrapping around Will's waist, and Will smiles, tipping his head back. He turns and presses a light kiss to Hannibal's jaw, shivers when Hannibal growls again and nips at his neck.

Hannibal breathes out heavily, warm and strong against his back, his fingers curling around Will's hips. "You are so tempting," he murmurs, making Will shiver again. "The sun has brightened your eyes, brought pink to your cheeks. Is it irrational to be jealous of a star?"

Will laughs. "Yeah," he replies, and reaches up to pet Hannibal's hand. "But it's pretty flattering, so I'll allow it."

Hannibal huffs, smiling, and tightens his grip. "I wish my positive thinking had extended to multiple occasions," he says. "I'd have you right now, if I had brought enough supplies."

Will's cheeks darken, and he swallows, lashes fluttering when Hannibal kisses warm and wide over his neck. "To think, I caught Hannibal Lecter unprepared," he teases, and Hannibal growls again, edging his teeth along Will's fluttering pulse.

"A rare mistake, and one I will not make twice," he promises.

Will grins, and turns in his arms, cupping his face and kissing him. "Tonight, then," he murmurs, watching Hannibal's eyes darken, his pupils flaring out wide to eclipse his iris. He kisses again, gives Hannibal a teasing, wide smile; "When I'm back from riding Red…" His hands drag down Hannibal's chest, noting the quiver of his lungs, the way his stomach sinks in, wanting Will to touch lower. "In your office, on those nice leather chairs."

"*Will*," Hannibal breathes, his hands gripping Will's hips tightly. He pulls them close together and steals Will's air in another deep kiss.

Will pulls back again, flushed and warm, his chest and throat tight. "The sooner you get me home, the sooner that can happen."

Hannibal smiles, and catches Will's mouth in one more kiss before he lets Will go, with what seems like monumental effort. They pack up quickly, since neither of them made any effort to unpack and the toiletries are really the only things that need retrieving. Since Beverly took

her own car, they don't wait for her, merely gather their things and check out of the hotel, piling into Hannibal's car and driving out of the parking lot. The competition is still going strong, and traffic is kind to them.

Hannibal touches the little screen in the middle console of his car, brings up Mischa's name, and Will smiles when he hears the phone begin to dial. Mischa answers on the fourth ring with a breathless little chirp. "Hello, big brother!"

"Good morning, Mischa," Hannibal replies warmly, smiling as he continues to drive. The siblings revert to their native language for the rest of the conversation, and Will tips his head back, closing his eyes and soaking in the warmth of the car, listening to the quiet rumble of the engine, the rush of air, and Hannibal and Mischa's soft voices as they talk.

He reaches out, after a while, flattening his hand on Hannibal's thigh. Grins when Hannibal stutters, and stiffens, his knuckles going white around the wheel. Mischa laughs. "Will!" she says. "Do not distract my brother while he is driving!"

Will laughs. "I'm not doing anything, Miss Lecter," he replies.

Mischa snorts, a little trilling laugh following after. "I am happy for you two," she says warmly. "Oh, when you return, if you're not too tired, we should all go riding!"

Hannibal smiles. "That would be lovely," he murmurs.

"I must go, but I will see you both later. Be safe!" The call ends and Hannibal changes the station to a classical music channel, and the car fills with the soft, lulling sweep of violins and cellos. Amidst them, the harmonious melody of a flute.

Will squeezes Hannibal's thigh, because he quite likes how Hannibal's mouth slackens when he does it. "Am I distracting you?" he purrs.

"Always," Hannibal replies openly. "From the moment I met you."

Will turns his head, stares at him.

Hannibal smiles, unrepentant; "You possess a striking aesthetic charm, and are polite, and good at your job. I noticed."

"I've worked for you for years," Will says quietly. "Why didn't you…?"

"Why didn't I make my attentions known?" Hannibal finishes for him, and Will nods. "Well, simply put, I didn't think they would be reciprocated. And given your rightful reservations about our relationship in the beginning, how do you think it would have looked had I been more forward when we barely knew each other?"

Will flushes, because he's not wrong.

"I want you to know, Will, that had you never returned my affections, my regard for you as a professional would not have wavered," Hannibal says gently, dropping one hand to rest over Will's on his thigh. "Though I will admit that recently I paid you far more attention that I

might have someone I wasn't attracted to – I would not have acted further, had I not sensed a certain receptiveness."

Will's blush darkens. Hannibal has called him 'responsive' more than once. He bites his lower lip, sucks in a breath. "Same here," he admits. "I mean, I wasn't going to let how I felt get in the way of doing my job. If you'd treated me any different, I'd still want to…make you proud. Prove myself."

Hannibal smiles, and squeezes his hand.

"Are you still committed to the decision to keep our relationship fairly open?" he asks. "To not hide it?"

Will nods. "Yes," he replies.

Hannibal's smile widens, as they slow enough in traffic for him to chance a glance over. His eyes are warm, bright in the sunlight, and he squeezes Will's hand again, and then lifts his own to gently touch Will's cheek. "Good."

Will grins. "Did you know Beverly and Francis had a pool going on about when we'd finally hook up?"

Hannibal laughs, and turns his attention back to the road. "I did," he replies, and Will huffs. "Mischa was in on it, too. I believe she lost." Will blinks. "She was certain that you would take her bed and we would behave without reproach during this weekend."

"Well," Will says, rolling his eyes, "I *tried*, but you just couldn't keep your damn hands to yourself."

Hannibal laughs again, and lifts Will's hand to kiss his knuckles. "I certainly didn't hear any complaints."

"Careful," Will warns playfully. He rolls his eyes again when Hannibal merely smiles. "You're terrible – worse than a peacock."

"Should I not be? You're worth being proud of."

Will's quip dies on his tongue, and he swallows, warm all over at Hannibal's abruptly soft tone. Hannibal lets their hands drop, resting on the gear shift, and he laces their fingers together. Will squeezes, and Hannibal smiles widely.

The car is barely at a halt before Will is throwing himself out of it, practically sprinting to the stables. Red is in his usual stall, munching on his haylage, and perks up as Will approaches. He tosses his head, tail swishing, and lets out a shrill whinny in greeting.

"Hey, big guy," Will breathes, grinning. He reaches out and Red walks over to him, putting his big head in Will's hands, snorting and shaking his mane as Will pets over his wide cheeks. Will sighs, suddenly so sharply aware of how much he'd missed Red, even for so short a time.

"You wanna go running?" he murmurs, and Red snorts again, ears forward. Will smiles and steps back, hurrying to the tack room to grab his gear. By the time he returns, Hannibal is by Red's head, petting and scratching under his forelock absently as Will hauls the saddle over the edge of the door, and steps inside.

He puts the saddle on first, cinching the girth strap tight, and Hannibal only pulls away long enough for Will to put the bridle on Red and run the reins over his neck. Hannibal steps in, then, to Red's other side, holding the far stirrup in place as Will hauls himself into the saddle with a breathless huff.

Hannibal smiles up at him, and leaves only long enough to bring back a helmet, which he pushes into Will's hands. Will takes it, smiling, and straps it on, and shivers when Hannibal's hand rests on his thigh, and squeezes.

"Have fun, Will," he says, and it sounds almost like an order. "I'll be waiting for you when you get back."

"You and Mischa aren't going to join me?" Will asks, remembering their conversation in the car. Red dances from foot to foot, raring to go, and Will pets his shoulder with a soothing sound.

Hannibal smiles, and shakes his head, opening the door and letting Will walk out. He follows to the open trail that leads to the trees. "I have some matters to attend to here, and I think Mischa will end up being out all day," he says gently. "I want you to enjoy yourself – for you both to enjoy yourselves."

Will's chest grows tight, and he can't resist bending down and cupping Hannibal's face, giving him a chaste kiss. Hannibal's eyes are bright with affection, his smile warm, and he pats Will's foot gently.

"Have fun and be safe," he says.

Will grins. "Yes, Sir," he replies, and turns away, gathering Red's reins and lifting from the saddle. It only takes a nudge of his heels before Red snorts, half-rearing and lunging into a wild gallop, and they both quickly disappear into the trees in a cloud of dust and gravel.

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Oh, he *missed* this. Riding Red is as close as Will might ever get to flying – he races Red through the fields, over each gate with ease. Every time, Red lands with a snort, as if bored by their height, and Will grins, petting his shoulder as he eases Red up one of the hills, remembering Hannibal's advice to sprint him uphill and strengthen his forelegs.

"Careful what you wish for, big guy," he murmurs affectionately. Red's ears tilt back like he's listening; "Soon enough you'll have jumps even a monster like you might look twice at."

In answer, Red snorts again, the sound like a scoff.

Will laughs, turning Red around and galloping him back down the hill, before he corrects their course and heads for another gate separating two fields. Red leaps towards it, breathing heavy as Will lifts from the saddle and braces himself over Red's neck. He flies over the wall easily again, lands heavy, and Will leans back. He settles low in the saddle, slowing Red to a canter that's more comfortable to sit through, and winds him in big, lazy circles around the next field, taking the time to try and correct his posture as much as possible.

A line through the head, down the spine, that's what Hannibal had said. Will's lower back aches and he can feel tension in his shoulders, and tries to straighten and relax as much as possible. He stretches his legs out until his hamstrings burn, lets Red's reins go loose for a moment as he pulls his arm across his chest until his shoulder pops.

Red blows out a heavy breath, tossing his head and shaking out his mane, and Will sighs, gathering his reins again and scratching at his sweaty neck. He slows Red to a halt, and looks back towards the stables, and squints up at the sky. The sun is beginning to set, the sky turning a softer pink towards the horizon.

He knows he hasn't been riding long – Red is still a tower of quivering muscle beneath him – but there are more productive ways to work off his excess energy.

He clicks his tongue and rises from the saddle, sprinting Red back over the wall and through the fields, the wind whipping at his face and stinging his eyes. He slows Red to a canter as they reach the trees and narrow riding path, and once they emerge, Will pauses, seeing Hannibal on the phone, leaning idly against the open training ring where Francis normally exercises Bonnie.

Their eyes meet, and Hannibal tilts his head, silently questioning why Will is back so soon. Will nods to the indoor stables, where Gideon set up the puissance course, and Hannibal's eyes darken in understanding. He smiles, and nods back.

Will leads Red over – the entrance is made of two, large sliding barn doors, and he angles Red so he can push at one while still remaining on the horse. He walks Red inside and closes

the door behind him with a grunt.

The innards are just as he remembers them, with several high, mean-looking jumps lining the edge of the ring and, of course, the wall in the center, towering up in the middle. The lights come on as Will trots Red into it, motion-sensitive, and he bites his lower lip, casting his eyes around. All of these jumps are much higher than the gates, or the ones outside in the open ring. Red took them with no trouble before, but that wall looks as daunting as ever. It seems bigger, somehow, than it did when Will last looked at it.

He swallows, and nudges Red with his heels, guiding him around the inside of the jumps. He can almost feel Red eyeing the puissance jump, the stallion's nostrils flaring wide and his head giving excited little bobs as Will leads him around the course.

His attention is caught as the side door on the other side of the half-wall opens, and he smiles when he sees Hannibal entering. Hannibal returns the smile, and Will walks Red over as Hannibal rests his forearms on the side wall.

He looks to the jump. "Did you make it higher?" he asks.

Hannibal nods, smiling. "Red took the first station very easily," he replies. "I had Gideon lift it."

Will swallows. "To?"

"It's currently seven and a half feet tall," Hannibal says quietly. "The current world record is seven foot ten, but most competitions haven't gone past seven-six for a while."

Will breathes out, and looks to the jump again. Now that he knows just *how* high it is, it looks all the more daunting.

He startles, when Hannibal's hand lands gently on his knee. "If Red can jump that, then you don't need to worry about his capability," he murmurs. Will meets his eyes. "It will help you focus, instead, on how you're feeling, and help you concentrate on doing *your* best, without worrying for him."

Will nods, and looks back to the jump.

"Well," he says, with more confidence than he feels, "no time like the present."

Hannibal smiles at him, and Will forces himself to take a steadying breath, nudging his heels to Red's flanks and trotting him to the door, turning him so he's facing the jump head-on. Hannibal steps through the little door leading to the main ring, and stands by it, arms folded across his chest and shoulders braced against the wall. Will shivers.

Six strides, maybe five. Red whinnies, and Will braces himself, and lets him go.

He rises from the saddle and braces himself over Red's neck as the stallion lunges for the jump. He grits his teeth, and knows he's tense, and nervous, but he tries to force it back, as Red closes the distance.

Four strides.

Three.

Two -.

Red leaps, farther away from the jump than Will intended, and there's a moment of total weightlessness, his forelegs tucked up high to his chest, his back legs kicking out. He lands with a heavy thud, stumbling and snorting heavily, and Will rears back to try and keep his seat, gripping tight with his thighs and heels as Red canters away from the jump, bucking as he, too, tries to keep his balance.

He turns, and winces. The top-most layer of the jump is askew.

Hannibal's lips purse, as Will trots Red over. "That will count as a disqualification," he says, his tone quiet. Will's chest tightens in anxiety, not wanting to face Hannibal's disappointment. "But it's promising." His eyes move to Will's. "You were far too tense."

"I got nervous," Will agrees.

Hannibal's head tilts. "Why?"

"I don't know," Will replies honestly.

Hannibal hums, and straightens. He walks over to the wall and reaches up to correct the top-most block, and then turns and fixes Will with another heavy look.

"Try again," he says.

Will nods, and leads Red back to the door. Hannibal is standing a little way away from the jump, and is watching closely. Will takes in a deep breath, lets it out, and gathers Red's reins again. Six strides turns to five, and Will holds tight to his reins, keeping him back and letting him gain that extra stride. Red hesitates, head tossing, and for a moment Will thinks he might refuse. But then he leaps, all his power centered on height instead of length.

He clears it. They land with a thud, and Will gasps, settling his hands on Red's shoulders as Red whinnies, tossing his head wildly, ears flat, and slows to a walk on the other side of the jump. He looks back and sees that the wall is still perfectly upright.

Hannibal is smiling widely, and fixes Will with a proud look. "Well done," he murmurs, and Will nods to himself, breathing hard, and strokes over Red's mane in reward as Red snorts loudly, nostrils flared wide.

"That…was better," he murmurs. "He's definitely fearless."

Hannibal's smile widens, his eyes dark. Will dismounts Red, taking a moment to steady his shaking legs, and gives Red a mint from his pocket, smiling when the horse lips at his hand, tail swishing happily. His flanks are dark with sweat, turning his coat to rust, and his head droops tiredly as Will runs the reins over his head and gathers them in his hands.

Hannibal approaches him, and Will remains still as he unfastens Will's helmet and removes it, letting it hang from his fingers. He flattens his free hand on Will's jaw and draws him into a kiss, and Will sighs, sagging against him, happy to let Hannibal kiss him until his lungs burn.

He pulls back, smiling, and looks to Red, petting over his wide cheek gently. Red snorts at him, ears rolling forward. "I should put him up," Will murmurs, running a hand through his sweat-damp hair. "I think that's enough for today."

"I agree," Hannibal murmurs. He meets Will's eyes again, and smiles. "I'll see you in the office when you're done."

Will nods, shivering, because he remembers exactly what he promised to do in Hannibal's office at the end of the day. His stomach clenches up, eager with anticipation, and Hannibal steals one more kiss before he turns away and leaves through the little door at the other side of the walkway. Will sighs, rolls his shoulders, and leads Red out of the ring, and to his stall. He untacks the horse and puts his gear away, and returns with a wet brush, a sweat scraper, hoof pick, and a fresh bucket of water which he empties into Red's water trough.

He grooms Red as Red drinks, until his coat gleams and his hooves are free of debris. Will parts from him with one last fond pat, and leaves the stall, returning the grooming kit to the shelves. He washes his hands and face, and runs his hands through his hair, and leaves the stables.

His attention is caught at the rumble and appearance of the truck, trailer attached, with Francis and Bonnie. He grins in greeting, and waves, as Francis pulls up near the stables and kills the engine, climbing out. "I won't lie, I didn't expect to see you today," he says with a conspiratorial grin.

Francis blushes, but doesn't deny it. "Had to get Bonnie home," he replies, idly eating from a bag of Skittles. He offers Will one, and he takes it and eats it. "But since I'm sure Beverly will tell you if I don't; Reba and I are going to be seeing each other again next week."

"Congrats, man, she seems awesome," Will says warmly.

"And congratulations to you and Hannibal," Francis replies. Now it's Will's turn to blush. "You headed home?"

"Ah, no," Will murmurs, blush darkening. "Going to the office for a bit."

Francis laughs, grin widening. "Have fun," he says, and Will rolls his eyes, rubbing the back of his neck. "I'll make myself scarce – just gotta put Bonnie to bed and then I'm headed out."

"You need help?"

"I'm good, you go."

Will nods. "Have a good night!" he says, and Francis replies with another grin, before he heads to the back of the trailer. Will shakes his arms out and heads over to the main building,

jogging up the steps, and into the little foyer. Hannibal's office door is closed, and Will pauses, knocks, and then lets himself in.

Hannibal is there, and greets him at the door with a glass of water, which Will takes with a grateful sound, draining half of it as the door closes behind him. Hannibal moves away, shedding his jacket and loosening his tie, and Will follows, setting the glass down on one of the little side tables. He reaches for Hannibal, turns him and pulls him into a kiss, smiling when Hannibal immediately grabs him, one hand in Will's hair and the other flattening on his hip.

"Francis is home," Will murmurs, because if Hannibal wants to speak to him, he won't deny Hannibal that – he's selfish, but he's not entirely without patience.

Hannibal, it seems, is. "He can wait," he growls, and tightens his hand in Will's hair, guiding him towards one of the big, comfortable leather chairs. The backs of Will's knees hit the edge and he collapses onto it with a huff, grinning when Hannibal eagerly climbs into his lap, both hands settling in Will's hair and tugging to get him to tilt back and expose his neck.

Will moans softly, hands flattening wide and warm on Hannibal's back. Hannibal is already hard, grinding fierce and determined against Will's belly, and he groans when Hannibal leans down and kisses his neck. His head tilts, and he sees on the side table, a jar of Hannibal's salve, and huffs a laugh.

"I don't think a numbing agent will be good for this," he teases.

Hannibal laughs, and shakes his head. "There's no numbing agent in that one," he replies, voice low and rough. "It's to help with chafing."

Will grins, and lifts his eyes to meet Hannibal's. "You want me to fuck you again? 'Cause if not, we have to switch positions."

Hannibal lets out a soft, impatient sound, and rises from Will's lap, getting to his feet. He tugs Will upright, kissing him deeply again, until Will feels like he might melt if Hannibal doesn't touch him soon. Then, he grabs Will's shoulders, and turns him, coaxing him to plant his knees on the seat of the chair, his elbows braced on the back.

He tugs on Will's jacket, pulling it off him, and then his hands move to Will's pants and push down. Will shivers, tugging his shirt over his head and letting it fall to the ground in another rustle of clothing, and Hannibal's hands flatten on Will's back.

He tenses, arching up, groaning as Hannibal's nails drag down his back, raising new red lines to match the ones he already laid. Will's back stings, soft and sensitive from sweat, and Hannibal rubs his hands up to Will's shoulders, gripping him tight, and Will gasps as he feels Hannibal's mouth, his teeth, settle on his back.

He spreads his legs, lowers himself to the chair, and whispers, softly; "Don't tease me."

Hannibal bites, and his hands move away. Will listens, turns his head to watch Hannibal unscrew the jar and dip his fingers in, coating them in the semi-clear paste. He sets the jar

down and pushes between Will's feet, and Will spreads his knees as much as he can with his leggings still tight around his thighs.

Hannibal sighs, and flattens his hand to the small of Will's back, his fingers dipping low to brush over Will's rim. Will sighs, fingers curling as Hannibal presses into him with two fingers, hisses at the burn as Hannibal sinks in deep.

He moans quietly, reaching back to try and get Hannibal to press deeper, and Hannibal's other hand lifts, fists in his hair and tugs tightly. He leans in, teeth to Will's ear, and curls his fingers down.

"Patience, darling," he purrs, and laughs when Will groans weakly. "I'll get you there. Just relax and enjoy yourself."

Will shivers, biting his lower lip, and tenses as Hannibal's fingers find his prostate, rubbing in slow, harsh circles around it. He drops a hand to his cock, stroking slowly in rhythm to Hannibal's fingers, growling as the arousal builds up in his chest, tightens with a flutter around his heart.

Hannibal growls, nipping at Will's exposed neck, tugging gently on his hair in a way that makes Will's lashes flutter, his thighs shaking, as he works in a third finger, stretching Will wide. "Fuck," he gasps, and whines when Hannibal pulls his fingers out.

He shivers when he hears Hannibal's clothes rustle, hears the slick of his hand wetting his cock, and then Hannibal's cockhead is pushing against him. Will arches back eagerly, and lets out a rough, eager sound as Hannibal's hands flatten on his hips, digging in with nails, and pushes in.

"*Fuck*," he growls, tensing up around Hannibal as he thrusts in. He relishes the sound Hannibal makes – the low, snarling noise of satisfaction as he bottoms out inside of Will. "*God*, yeah, fuck-."

"*Will*," Hannibal gasps. He flattens himself over Will, running his hands beneath Will's chest and over the tops of his shoulders, rolling his hips to try and get as deep as possible. He feels huge, splitting Will apart, and Will groans, open-mouthed and gasping, as he starts to move. The chair creaks, scuffing the floor, as Hannibal fucks him fiercely, driving the breath from Will's lungs and leaving him empty and aching every time he withdraws.

Hannibal shudders above him, slick with sweat and so warm and heavy. Will lifts himself to Hannibal's chest, to his mouth, as Hannibal bites down on the knot of scar tissue on the back of his shoulder. He whines, gasps out another weak sound. "Harder," he growls, and doesn't know if he means Hannibal's teeth or cock, but Hannibal obeys with both, sinking his teeth into Will's shoulder and fucking him hard enough that the chair scrapes across the floor. "*Fuck*, that's good, baby. Just like that."

Hannibal growls behind him, rakes his nails down Will's exposed chest. He's still wearing his shirt, and the feeling of fine fabric rutting against Will's stinging back hurts so nicely. Hannibal's mouth seeks and finds Will's nape, his lips part wide and warm to suck a dark, bruising kiss to a spot that has Will's entire upper body breaking out in goose bumps.

Will bares his teeth, clenches his eyes tightly shut, his thighs aching from the punishing force of Hannibal's thrusts, his heart racing. This comes pretty damn close to the feeling of flight all over again. "Harder," he demands, and Hannibal lets out a low, eager sound behind him, teeth in his neck and hands grabbing harshly at Will's hips, keeping him still as he arches and thrusts, yanking Will back against him so he's as deep as he can get. Will gasps, collapsing beneath him, glad for the sturdiness of the chair because he definitely wouldn't be able to keep upright without it.

He wipes his sweaty forehead against the back of it, puts his teeth to his knuckles as he strokes himself, every touch of Hannibal's cock against his prostate pushing him higher. He feels like the wild one, now, like Hannibal is doing his very best to ride him into the ground.

Hannibal wraps an arm around him, holding him by his stomach, and forcefully coaxes Will to arch up again, until the angle is just right and Hannibal's cock drags along his prostate with every thrust. Will can't stop the noises he's making; the soft, desperate moans, the high-pitched whines, the low growls as Hannibal fucks him.

"Will," Hannibal breathes – a warning.

"Fuck, yeah, do it," Will answers, begging without breath. He presses his forehead to the chair and reaches back with his free hand, digging his nails into Hannibal's thigh. "Don't stop."

Hannibal snarls, and reaches down, batting Will's hand away from his cock and taking over, squeezing the head and thumbing through his leaking slit. Will groans, cupping his balls, stroking behind them as Hannibal continues to move inside him, both of them chasing the high that feels like a sprint, uphill, almost to the crest.

"Will," Hannibal whispers again, nuzzling his sweaty hair. He lets out a breath, thrusts slowing, hips grinding tight to Will's ass. His hand flexes, settles, digs into Will's hip as he keeps stroking Will's cock. "*Will*."

It's immensely flattering, to find that the ever-loquacious Hannibal Lecter has been robbed of every word but Will's own name.

Hannibal snarls, presses deep, his cock twitching. He shudders, full-body, and Will feels it everywhere they're pressed together. He lets out a raw, ragged sound, and goes still, and Will shivers, clenching up around him, taking over as he works his hips back and touches himself as Hannibal's hand goes lax.

Will smiles, panting. "*Yeah*, fill me up, Sir. Want it."

Hannibal groans, and flattens himself over Will's back, hips jerking as he does just that. He kisses Will's shoulder and Will sighs, closing his eyes at the feeling of Hannibal's cock thickening, just for a moment, before he spills inside. Then, Hannibal starts to move again, new slick making the noises obscenely wet as he fucks through the mess he left behind.

He's still hard enough that Will gets that delicious fullness, that burn, and moans softly, stomach tensing up as he resumes his pace on his own cock. He comes when Hannibal's hand

flies to his hair, knotting and tugging, and bites down on the back of his neck. The flash of pain is enough to spur him on over the final leap, and he gasps heavily, tense and shuddering as he comes all over the seat and back of the chair.

He lets go of his cock, bracing his dirty hand on the armrest, and whines when Hannibal keeps moving, lazily using his body to drag it out for both of them. Eventually he's too soft to stay inside, and slips out of Will, petting down his back and silently commanding Will stay still. Will's ass clenches up, and he moans at the feeling of Hannibal's come leaking back out of him.

Hannibal growls, and thumbs over his wet, sore rim. Will hears him sucking his thumb into his mouth, and Will rears up when Hannibal tugs on his hair, turns him and kisses him deeply. He tastes like his own come and Will moans, eagerly licking behind his teeth to get a taste for himself.

Hannibal pets down his chest, settling over his racing heart as it starts to calm, and Will smiles, tipping his head back and happily letting Hannibal nuzzle and mouth at his sweaty neck. He settles on his heels, and pets over Hannibal's hands and arms, back to his exposed hips as they catch their breath.

"You are exquisite," Hannibal says, and Will likes the sound of him like that, fucked-out and sated. Hannibal steps back, letting him get to his feet as Will pulls his leggings back up around his waist, and Hannibal does the same. *God*, Hannibal looks good like that, flushed and sweaty, his eyes shining. He reaches out and pushes Hannibal's limp fringe back from his face.

Hannibal takes Will in his arms, drawing him into another long kiss that robs Will of the precious air he'd managed to gain. Hannibal parts from the kiss, breathing in heavily, and presses his nose to Will's neck, apparently delighted at the cling of his scent to Will's sweaty skin.

Will grins. "If you want, I can come early tomorrow before we head to Bedelia and Anthony's."

Hannibal pulls back so Will can see his face, brows raised, head tilted.

"I don't care if we cause them any 'olfactory offense'."

Hannibal smiles widely, showing his teeth. "Now who's the peacock?" he teases.

Will grins. "Is that a 'Yes'?"

"You're always welcome here, Will. Say the word and I'll do whatever you desire."

Will hums, lets his smile turn playful and promising. "Careful," he warns, "an attitude like that begs to be taken advantage of."

Hannibal huffs through his nose, looking remarkably pleased with himself. He's tactile, still, petting over Will's neck and shoulders, down his arms. "How are your shoulders feeling?"

"I choose any answer that gets me another massage."

Hannibal nods, smiling, and kisses Will again. "Finish your water and sit in the other chair."

"Shouldn't we clean this one?" Will asks, gesturing to the one he made a mess on.

Hannibal's nostrils flare again, his eyes growing several shades darker as he looks at the stain. "…Not yet," he replies, his voice growing hoarse, and Will grins to himself, fetching his water and finishing it as Hannibal retrieves another jar of salve – this one with the numbing agent he had given Will before.

Will takes his seat as Hannibal commanded, and by the end of the massage, he's loose and lax and sore for entirely different reasons. They don't end up leaving the office until well past midnight, and by the time Will gets home, he has just enough wherewithal to force his loose-limbed body through feeding the dogs, letting them out and back in, before he collapses onto his mattress and falls immediately into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Chapter End Notes

I'm thinking maybe two chapters left, now that they've both been given a /coughs/ good ride.

Chapter 18

Though Will fully intended to make good on his offer to come to the stables early so that he and Hannibal could have some private time together before heading to Bedelia and Anthony's stables, he was so tired and worn out from the weekend that he didn't set an earlier alarm, and feels in no real hurry to rush his daily routine of fixing breakfast for himself and the dogs, letting them out to relieve themselves and play, and brew himself enough coffee to ensure he's alert by the time he gets to the stables.

He isn't even sure if, technically, they agreed to meet early, so he's surprised – surprised, and very suddenly warm with affection – to see Hannibal's Bentley sitting next to his own car as he opens the door to let the dogs outside.

Hannibal gets out of the car and Winston perks up from his normal spot on the porch, woofing curiously, but he must pick up on the fact that Will is happy to see him, for he doesn't do anything more aggressive than that. Hannibal has a bag slung over his shoulder, boxy like a cooler, his coat black and reaching his knees, so that only a small flash of white riding pants are exposed above his shiny leather boots.

Will hasn't dressed yet, so he's only in underwear and a t-shirt, a robe hanging by its fingertips to his shoulders, but with the way Hannibal is looking at him, he might as well be the best-dressed person in the world.

Hannibal approaches the house, through the pack of dogs as they nuzzle and yip at him, until Will calls them off with a sharp 'tsk'. Addy, the cream-colored sheepdog mix with brown around her ears and face, is the only one who follows Hannibal up the steps.

Will reaches for him, curls his fingers in the wide lapels of his coat, and pulls him in for a kiss that Hannibal eagerly answers. "You look well-rested," he says, half-pleased, half-smug. Will grins and mouths briefly at his jaw in answer, before he pulls away and lets Hannibal inside. Winston follows them in, and Addy takes her place as watchdog in Winston's absence.

"Are you hungry? I brought breakfast," Hannibal says. Will turns to him with a raised brow, finds Hannibal looking over the entryway. His eyes alight on the dog beds, and then slide along to Will's own mattress, complete with rumpled sheets and messy blankets. Then, to the little dining room table placed by the window with two thin metal chairs.

Will clears his throat. "Breakfast sounds good," he replies. "I have coffee."

Hannibal smiles at him. There's no judgement on his face, though Will knows enough about him to know that even if he were feeling it, he would keep it hidden for the sake of politeness and out of respect. Will knows his house isn't exactly a five-star hotel, but it does the job of keeping him warm and dry during winter, and gives him a place to put all his shit, which is good enough for him.

He's never seen Hannibal's house – perhaps he might, someday soon – but if it's anything like his office then Will is sure the ambiance of the place outmatches his by a factor of about a

million. He swallows, viciously tamping down the pervasive sense of inadequacy and the stark reminder of their relative positions in life before it can rise too far, and goes to his kitchen to fetch coffee for them both.

"Do you need to warm it?" he calls. "I have an oven and microwave you're free to use."

"I believe it's kept relatively well," Hannibal replies, and Will nods to himself. He adds some creamer to Hannibal's coffee since he knows that's how he likes it, and returns with their cups to see Hannibal carefully removing two condensation-heavy containers from the cooler bag, as well as napkin-wrapped forks, which he sets in each place.

Hannibal smiles at him, and takes his cup with a grateful sigh, brows rising when he sees his coffee is not as black as Will's. "Did you put milk in this?" he asks.

"Technically it's half-and-half, so it might be a little sweeter than you're used to, but yeah," Will says, and feels his cheeks heating as he takes his seat, warmed by the surprised and pleased look Hannibal gives him. "Beverly mentioned how you take it, once. Sorry if you've changed your preferences since then."

"I haven't," Hannibal replies, and Will blinks, looking up, surprised to hear how fond and gentle his voice has gotten. Hannibal takes a sip and hums gratefully, and sits across from Will. "It's perfect, thank you."

Will's flush deepens. He likes it when he's the one making Hannibal look like that.

They remove the lids from the containers and Will breathes in, staring down at the thick mass of scrambled eggs, dotted with green pepper pieces, diced sausage, and red chili flakes. It smells absolutely fantastic and Will's stomach clenches with a sharp rumble, reminding him that he hasn't eaten since the breakfast buffet at the hotel, the day before.

He picks up his fork and takes a bite, sectioning off a piece of the eggs and sausage. It's still warm, and the eggs are light and salty, the sausage just burned enough on the edges to give it a crispiness between his teeth. He lets out a soft, happy noise, and Hannibal's smile is wide.

"Did you make this?" he asks when his mouth is free.

Hannibal nods. "During my youth, I became very invested in staying healthy. My mother was sick for most of my childhood after Mischa was born, and while studying to be a surgeon I became very aware of just how terribly a bad diet can affect the human body." Will hums, and takes another bite. "Then, of course, keeping physically fit was paramount once I turned my attention towards horsemanship, so I'm very careful about what I put into my body, in the hopes that I can keep up. I cook most of my and Mischa's meals myself."

Will grins at him. "Alright, I won't rat her out and tell you how many times I've seen her with a Taco Bell bag in her hands."

Hannibal grimaces, and it only seems somewhat theatrical. "There are some things a big brother ought not to know."

Will laughs, sitting back and wiping at his mouth. "Well, feel free to use me as an outlet for your culinary desires. A guy could get used to eating like this."

Hannibal's eyes shine with affection, and he smiles into his next sip of coffee.

"I know I mentioned coming to the stables early this morning, and I'm sorry I didn't. You didn't have to come all the way out here."

"Nonsense, Will, I enjoy your company," Hannibal replies with an easy smile. "It's no trouble."

"I know what that commute is like," Will says, and leans forward to continue eating.

"Traffic was kind to me," Hannibal replies. "Besides, Bedelia is a notoriously late riser. The additional time in the car will increase our chances of her being awake when we visit." Will's head tilts. "Anthony likes to pretend he's the head of the house, but he's a fool if he thinks he's the one in charge."

Will huffs. "Yeah, I kind of gathered that," he says softly. "She holds the purse strings, right?"

Hannibal nods. "I admire Anthony in that regard – if nothing else, he certainly knows how to entertain rich women." Will's brows rise, and Hannibal gives him a somewhat sheepish grin. "Forgive me – one cannot help hearing gossip."

"I didn't peg you for someone interested in gossip," Will says. Not judging, of course. He knows, had he insisted on keeping their relationship a secret, Hannibal would have agreed solely for his sake, not because he feared how others would judge them.

"I'm always interested in hearing other people's stories," Hannibal replies with a shrug. "I simply don't care what they say about my own." He smiles. "It's a benefit of having friends stay with you for many years – they know better than to believe everything they hear."

"I'm sure you're above reproach," Will says with a sly grin. He finishes his meal and sets the fork inside, sealing the container again, and places it within the cooler bag Hannibal brought. Hannibal finishes soon after, and Will rises to open the door and call the dogs back inside. "I'll get dressed and then we can head out?"

Hannibal nods, and Will can't resist going to him and stealing one more kiss before he pulls away. His dogs have all gone back to their beds, but they're eyeing Hannibal with open curiosity. Winston sits in the walkway between Will's bed and the fireplace, ears perked up and tail swishing across the floor.

"I'll be right back," Will promises, though he knows all his animals are very well-behaved, and won't become aggressive unless provoked. He leaves, hurrying upstairs where he keeps all his clothes, and dresses quickly. He contemplates, for a moment, dressing in the fine clothes Hannibal gave him, but forgoes it after another moment's thought. He quite likes the prospect of how Bedelia and Anthony will react to seeing him in street clothes, so he puts on a pair of jeans, his normal boots that he wears for mucking out the stalls, a black t-shirt, and a

red and white plaid shirt over that. He wets his hands and runs his fingers through his hair in a paltry attempt to calm it down, and returns downstairs.

He stops, and smiles, when he sees Hannibal still sitting in his chair, both hands cupped around Winston's sleek head. He's petting the dog like he might pet a horse, smoothing down his cheeks, up over his forehead, as Winston pants and nuzzles his hands.

Hannibal looks up, and smiles when he sees Will watching. "What's his name?" he asks.

"Winston," Will replies, and the dog perks up at the sound of his name, turning his head and huffing in Will's direction. Hannibal lets him go and Winston trots over, nose up and sitting when Will lifts a hand to gain his attention. Will grins, and pulls his hand in a circle, and Winston turns on his hindlegs, swinging around like Will has watched Francis and Mischa do in their dressage courses.

He drops his hand, and goes to the shelf holding his dog treats, and tosses one to Winston, who catches it with a snap of his teeth. Hannibal stands and shoulders his bag, and Will goes to him, gathering his keys, wallet, phone, and coat, and locks up behind them before they head to Hannibal's car.

"Do you train all your dogs to do tricks?" he asks idly, as the engine purrs to life and he pulls around Will's car, back onto the dirt tracks leading to the main road. The radio is set to a classical music station, quietly, the air filled with the sweet sound of violins and flutes.

"Only the ones that seem interested in it," Will replies with a shrug. "I think whoever owned him before taught him some stuff, but there are others who are better suited as watchdogs, some that are essentially overgrown puppies that have no interest in learning anything new." He smiles over at Hannibal. "I don't force them into it if they don't want to."

Hannibal nods, expression fond. "I can see why Red took such a liking to you so quickly, then," he says, and reaches across the divider to take Will's hand, squeezing gently.

"Maybe," Will murmurs, warmed by the affectionate tone in Hannibal's voice. He sighs, and tips his head back, resting against the headrest. "How long's the drive?"

"If traffic remains relatively clear, we should be there in about three hours," Hannibal replies. Will nods absently. "If you would like to get some more rest, please feel free."

Will huffs, grinning. "You didn't wear me out that bad," he teases, and doesn't comment on the brightly pleased look on Hannibal's face. He squeezes Will's hand, and Will squeezes back, before they settle into companionable silence, only the music and the rumble of the engine breaking it as they head North towards Bedelia and Anthony's stables.

They arrive close to ten in the morning. The place looks just as Will imagined it, with a tall archway marking the entrance from the road to the long driveway that winds between huge

stretches of perfectly-manicured fields. The fences are perfectly white, the edges of the road lined with purple and pink flowers, and every fencepost has a golden *DM* painted upon it, that matches the swirling cursive *Du Maurier* set into the archway.

The main building looks more like a castle than a stable, complete with white walls and turret-like corners, and makes Will think of enchanted German palaces where princesses are kept hidden away, awaiting their white knight to come and rescue them. There is a line of open-facing stalls made of dark wood and black slating on the top, all empty, and there isn't a stray piece of hay or straw in sight.

The whole place looks far too pristine for Will's liking, as if it was lifted from a catalogue, and makes his neck itch.

Hannibal drives up to a circle in front of the main door. There's even a Goddamn fountain in the middle of it – Will rolls his eyes, huffing, and Hannibal gives him a warm, conspiratorial smile, before he parks and they both get out of the car.

The front doors open with a flourish, and Bedelia and Anthony step out. He's wearing the same fine kind of riding gear Hannibal is, and Bedelia has a strapless dress that is a swirling mix of black and gold, so very out of place in a stable – though, perhaps, not this stable, Will thinks idly, looking around the spotless stalls again.

She gives Hannibal a warm, wide smile, and walks down the stone steps, her heels clicking loudly as she grips Hannibal's shoulders and gives him a kiss on the cheek. "So glad you could make it," she says lightly, like Hannibal's visit stood a chance of being canceled. Perhaps she thought Hannibal was all bark and no bite – a foolish thing to think. Her icy eyes slide over to Will, and her brows arch, lips pursing as she takes in his state of dress. "And Will, pleased to meet you again."

"And you," Will replies. He'll be polite as long as she is.

Her smile is thin and pale as she is, and Anthony appears at her shoulder, looking somewhat more friendly in the way a fox smiles wider than a snake. "Hannibal!" he cries, and pulls Hannibal into an awkward, one-armed hug. "And Will!" He does the same, and Will can't help feeling like he's wrestling him like Will's dogs do, trying to use his height and strength to cow him. He huffs and rolls his shoulders once he's released. "Come on, let's get to it, shall we! The grand tour."

Will has never been to these stables, and so Hannibal accepts the offer with a gracious nod, and Bedelia leads the way towards the open stalls. Behind them is a building, a converted warehouse that has the same vaguely European castle look about it, painted white with faux castle decoration around the windows lining the top of it that allow in light. He's shown the empty stalls, the large racing track lining the open fields, and then they walk towards the warehouse.

Will's fingers flex, and he looks in Hannibal's direction. "Where the Hell are all the horses?" he whispers, soft enough that only Hannibal can hear.

Hannibal presses his lips together, his expression betraying the fact that he's been considering a similar question for some time. They walk to the warehouse and Anthony turns to them with a wide smile, gesturing behind him to the closed doors.

"We've gathered all the horses we're willing to sell; they're waiting inside," he says. Hannibal hums, nodding. "All of them are of the finest stock, of course."

"Of course," Hannibal says, and Will turns away to hide his smile.

Anthony nods, and Bedelia gives them all another thin smile, wincing in the sunlight. "I think I'll go sit for a while," she says, and gives Anthony a kiss on the cheek that is somehow less fond than the one she gave Hannibal. "Take your time, gentlemen. Have a good day."

She turns away and walks back towards the main building without another word. Will watches her go, head tilted, and wonders if he ever noticed how slow and deliberate her steps are, like she's suffering vertigo and has to focus on placing each foot. He frowns, pressing his lips together, and turns back when Anthony clears his throat, gaining their attention again.

"Shall we?" he asks, and Hannibal nods, and they follow him inside. The warehouse opens to a large indoor ring, barren of jumps or any kind of decoration. There's a waist-high wall separating a walkway and the ring like Hannibal's stables have. The walls are white and remind Will of something clinical and unwelcoming, and the itch gets worse.

Inside the ring are a dozen animals. Will recognizes the little mare Anthony rode during the weekend competition. Most of the horses are untacked except for a halter and lead rope, each of them held by what Will assumes is a college student willing to stand there and look official for ten dollars an hour. He tilts his head, frowning, as he follows Anthony and Hannibal down the walkway until they are able to stand in the middle and survey all of the horses.

Anthony gives them a charming smile. "I'm going to go check on Bedelia," he says, and Hannibal gives him another nod. "I'll return shortly – we can walk any of the horses around and show you how they move, and you're more than welcome to go in and make more thorough assessments. Excuse me," he finishes, and walks past Hannibal and Will, back the way they came.

Will eyes the horses, unnerved by how still and quiet they are. Even the one with the 'penchant for bucking', that Anthony rode, seems almost drugged, her head low-hanging and her ears flopping to either side of her.

He slides his hands into the back pockets of his jeans and lifts his chin. "See anyone missing?" he asks.

Hannibal's head tilts, and he lets out a curious sound.

"The horses. I'm sure you've kept track of their stock. Anyone here that shouldn't be, or should be here, but isn't?" He looks Hannibal's way. "This is all of them, isn't it? Every animal they own. There's nowhere to hide them anywhere else."

Hannibal sighs though his nose, and nods. "All present and accounted for," he murmurs. His brow creases, and he looks like he is considering the same thing Will is.

He presses his lips together, and steps closer, turning around so that not even the handlers can read his lips. "Is Bedelia always like that?" Hannibal tilts his head again, showing he's listening. "Faded. Tired." He shakes his head and Will looks to him again, manages a tight smile. "Come on, you were almost a doctor – I'm sure you could make some educated guesses."

"Even if she were sickly, I'm sure she is getting the best medical care money can buy," Hannibal replies. His expression is flat, stoic, as he looks back over the horses Anthony has offered.

Will folds his arms across his chest, swallows, looks ahead to the blank wooden wall. "What if she wasn't?" he asks. "What if she didn't even know she was sick, or someone was stopping her from getting help?"

"Are you always so suspicious?" Hannibal asks with a small, fond smile. Will turns towards him.

"I know people," he says insistently. "The only reason you'd sell the farm is if you couldn't afford to keep it, or you have no intention of sticking around." Hannibal blinks at him, and Will swallows again, looking out to the horses. "How much do you think he'd ask for you to buy them all?"

"To my recollection, only a few of these have proven records of success in competitions." He pauses, considering. "Perhaps half a million for the lot, less if they're desperate and willing to negotiate."

"And the land?" Will presses.

"Easily another five," Hannibal replies.

Will sucks in a breath, holds it, hisses it out and turns away again. "Sick wife, and selling all his stock," he says. "Five and a half million payout, and that's before anything like life insurance and shared bank accounts come into play." He can feel Hannibal's eyes on the side of his face, and lifts his chin again. "Maybe I'm reading too much into it, but you know Anthony better than I do – he seem like that kinda guy?"

Hannibal doesn't respond, but his silence is heavy.

The door opens to the outside again, and Anthony emerges, looking flushed and smiling just as brightly and charming as ever. "Sorry about that," he says, approaching them and dusting off his hands. "Honestly, I wish I had the soul of a woman who was perfectly content lounging about all day."

The way he says it leaves a sour taste in Will's mouth.

"See anything you like?" Anthony asks.

Hannibal eyes him, and Will shivers at the darkness there. Despite his outwardly calm appearance, he can see that there is something deeply suspicious and angry, prowling around behind his iris. He doesn't think Will is wrong.

"I'll take all of them," he says. "Along with the equipment, trailers, and anything else you're willing to part with to see to their transport. The staff, as well, if the commute suits them." Anthony blinks, his eyes flashing in delight. Will knows it's not technically possible for eyes to change shape into dollar signs, but if anyone comes close, it's Anthony Dimmond.

"Well," Anthony says, blowing out a breath, pretending to be surprised, Will is sure. "I can certainly speak to the staff. Depending on their salary, with everything else, it might run you just shy of a million."

Hannibal smiles. "I'll have my lawyer draw up the contact immediately. We can begin negotiations on the final price once I know how many hands I'll be taking on with the horses."

"Excellent!" Anthony says, clapping his hands together in delight. "I think this calls for a toast!"

"Perhaps another time," Hannibal replies coolly. "Unfortunately, there is still much work to be done to prepare for the coming season. Please give Bedelia my best, and pass on my regrets that we could not give her a formal farewell."

"Of course, of course," Anthony says, nodding briskly. With a wave of his hand, the handlers tut to their animals and begin to lead them out of the ring. Will follows Hannibal and Anthony out into the warm sunlight, and they amble towards the car. "You've done a good thing here, my friend. I only regret I could not offer you more to choose from!"

Hannibal's smile is sharp, as he shakes Anthony's hand. "Best of luck to you," he replies easily. Anthony grins, and shakes Will's hand as well. "You'll be hearing from my lawyer about the contract as soon as possible. Have a good day."

Anthony nods, and watches them get into the car. Will waits until Hannibal has turned it around and is heading down the long driveway before he lets out his breath. "You're really going to buy all of them?"

"Yes," Hannibal says, as if it's just that simple. Will can't even fathom having the kind of money where a million-dollar investment doesn't even make him blink.

"What about Bedelia?"

"She was never truly interested in owning a stable," Hannibal replies. "She likes the money and the status, but I never got the sense that she was very invested in the practice itself." He presses his lips together and breathes in, deeply. "I have a friend at Johns Hopkins who owes me a favor. I'll reach out to him and have him perform an examination on her, to see if there is something she should be aware of."

Will nods.

Hannibal is silent for a while, and then he lets out a small, amused sound. "I'm surprised that you care so much."

"I don't have to like her to be a decent human," Will replies, sharper than he intended, but it just makes Hannibal's smile widen. "And regardless of how I feel about the people involved, no one deserves to be slowly poisoned for inheritance money."

Hannibal nods, and reaches out to squeeze Will's hand. "I'll take care of it," he says, soft and assured. Will smiles, and lifts his hand so he can kiss Hannibal's palm. They pause at the entrance gate, under the archway, and Hannibal halts the car, and leans over to pull Will into a kiss.

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

/wipes blood from nose
ALRIGHT GUYS, HERE'S THE GRAND FINALE.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

With barely over a week left before the puissance competition, Will throws himself into training Red. His days are spent working Red until they're both exhausted, sweaty, and shaking with exertion, but he's pleased to find that Red's spirit doesn't dampen in the slightest. Rather, the stallion seems to get more and more eager with every run around the ring, every time he can jump. Will doesn't take him back to the fields, but focuses on controlling his stride and pace within the rings, to the point where he can turn Red on a dime, and send him flying from a near-standstill.

Because of the vigorous regimen, he's too tired to do more than sit and speak with Hannibal most nights, though Hannibal doesn't seem to mind, even the few nights Will simply falls asleep on the overstuffed couch in Hannibal's study and wakes to find breakfast and coffee and a fresh change of clothes sitting next to him. He knows Hannibal goes to his house and takes care of the dogs and fetches Will more clothes for him when Will doesn't make it back home, and it's such a simple gesture for how much it means, how Hannibal simply *does* it. Will has never been with someone so conscientious.

Hannibal is delighted, clearly, by Will's progress, and is eager to offer an encouraging word, or note on his performance when he's able to watch, and rubs Will's shoulders and thighs whenever Will asks him to. In turn, Will uses his mornings before training to get Jesse up to speed with clearing out and mucking all the stalls, taking over Will's regular duties, and assists him and Gideon with clearing out the empty stalls in preparation for Bedelia's horses when they arrive.

Three stable hands come with the horses. There is Jimmy and Brian, who are older and weren't among those tasked with standing with the animals Anthony showed them, but Hannibal must know their names and faces, because he greets them with a fond familiarity, and Brian immediately begins helping Beverly out with her administrative tasks while Jimmy takes his place alongside Will, Gideon, and Jesse with the more hands-on help with the horses.

There is a third, one of the younger ones that did stand with the horses, named Randall. He gravitates towards Francis immediately and Will is happy to see them form a friendship almost instantly. Pergalė even likes him, which is definitely saying something, and so Randall takes over with her care when Mischa isn't around, and Will or Hannibal don't have the time to exercise her or clean out her stall.

The days pass swiftly, as if racing with a similar eagerness Will feels for the competition. It's going to take place in the same event center that the three-day show was, and Will and Francis are taking a break as the sun begins to set, watching the field where they keep the mares and fillies, away from the stallions.

Francis has a bag of Twizzlers in his hand, and offers one to Will, who takes it with a grin. "I don't suppose we'll be seeing a certain Miss McClane tomorrow?" he teases, grin widening when Francis' cheeks turn a soft pink.

"She told me she'd be there," he replies. In front of them, Bonnie seems to have taken it upon herself to be the female envoy for the new horses, and is locked in a grooming circle with Olivia, and the little mare Anthony rode, whom Will has learned is called Aphrodite. It seems Bedelia and Anthony liked naming their horses after Greek gods, for most of their stock share a similar genre of names. The mares are all scratching each other's withers with their teeth, tails swishing absently to ward away flies.

Will finishes his Twizzler, and straightens when he feels eyes on the back of his neck. He turns, and smiles when he sees Hannibal approaching. Francis gives Hannibal a nod of greeting, and sighs. "No rest for the wicked," he tells Will with a conspiratorial smile, and turns away, walking back towards the stables. Will sees Randall hovering by the entrance, and the two men fall into step and disappear from sight.

Hannibal approaches Will with a warm smile, and Will sighs as a hand immediately flattens to his shoulder, absently rubbing, and he steals a quick kiss because he can't help himself. "Bottom of the ninth," he murmurs.

Hannibal nods. "You and Red will steal the show tomorrow, I'm certain," he says quietly, as firm in his conviction as he has been from the start. Will doesn't let himself feel nervous, he can't afford it, and he sighs and drops his head when Hannibal rubs over the back of his neck, before his hand falls away, and he mimics Will's position, leaning against the fencepost, forearms braced and the fence taking his whole weight. "Bedelia has been taken to hospital."

Will blinks, and looks at him.

"My friend confirmed my suspicions, and admitted her immediately." He blows out a breath, his eyes black with anger. "Aspirin poisoning."

Will frowns. "Is that even possible?"

"It's rare, and considerably difficult given that she didn't even know she was being dosed so heavily, but yes," Hannibal replies with a nod. "It's possible, with a high enough dose too close together to allow the body's natural metabolism to flush it out. She's being kept for observation, but should recover quickly."

Will nods, his fingers flexing. "That's good."

Hannibal hums, and is silent for a moment, before he sighs again. "I want to thank you, Will," he says, and Will looks at him again. "Even though Bedelia and I are far from as close as we used to be, she's one of my oldest friends, and I would have never forgiven myself if Anthony

had succeeded with his plan and done grievous harm to her. Or if, by the time I had noticed, it had been too late." He smiles at Will. "Your suspicions and sharp eyes might have saved her life, and regardless of how you feel about her, I am eternally grateful."

"Like I said, I don't have to be her friend, or even like her, to want to help."

"That compassion is rarer than you'd think," Hannibal says softly, his eyes gentling, shining in the setting sunlight. He smiles, and presses his lips together, looking away again. "I wanted to ask for your thoughts on another matter."

Will's head tilts.

"I persuaded my friend to try convincing Bedelia to launch an official investigation for Anthony. Regardless of what happens, I doubt their marriage will survive the ordeal. But I am certain that, eventually, Bedelia will sell her land and stables, since she has no need for either." He pauses, and adds; "I'm considering buying it from her."

Will's eyes widen, and he swallows.

"Mischa will be finished with her schooling soon, and may intend to remain here, though I doubt it. I know that Bedelia's stable is quite far away, but I wanted to ask if you would consider…"

He trails off, and looks almost nervous. Will straightens and reaches for him, taking his hand. "Ask," he says, because he's about eighty percent sure he knows where Hannibal is going with this, but he's not going to jump to conclusions. The only reason they've gotten this far is because Will has demanded Hannibal be forthcoming and honest with him.

"Getting it off the ground will be an immense task," Hannibal says. "It's better-located for a camp, or off-season location. Even a training ground, for Bedelia certainly has more land than I do. But there's also plenty of space for someone to live. For dogs, even."

Hannibal turns to him, meeting his eyes. "I wanted to ask if you would consider moving there with me, for a time, until it becomes sufficient enough to function mostly on its own."

Even though he suspected it was coming, the offer robs Will of breath for a moment.

"Mischa and Francis, along with Beverly and Gideon, can take care of things here, and it's not so far that we would not be able to visit should anything disastrous happen. The rest of Bedelia's staff will be out of a job and I wouldn't force them all to relocate here, or run the risk of a new owner simply letting all of them go and turning the land into a…shopping mall, or some such thing." His mouth twists with distaste, and Will huffs a small laugh.

He squeezes Hannibal's hand gently, their fingers lacing. "So, if you bought Bedelia's stable from her, you'd want me to go up there with you? Live there and help you run it?"

Hannibal's gaze is steady, no doubt in him at all. "Yes," he says, as if it's just that simple. Perhaps it is.

"Not to make it sound like I'm saying 'No', because I'm not, but I know even less about managing a stable than I do about training horses."

"You proved remarkably skilled at the latter. I'm sure the former will provide a worthy, but not insurmountable challenge." Hannibal smiles, and his eyes shine. "And I am more than willing to teach you."

It's impulsive, for sure, and uprooting his dogs and all his stuff won't be easy, but that ridiculous mansion would serve just as well for keeping him warm and dry during the winter, and house his clothes and all his stuff as easily as his home in Virginia does. His pack would love to have that much land to roam around on.

"And you'll be there too," he murmurs. "So we'll be…living together. Running a stable together."

"I understand it's a big decision," Hannibal replies, answering the doubt Will hasn't technically voiced yet. After all, their relationship is still so new, and while Will has no misgivings about Hannibal as a businessman and employer, they haven't been together long enough to know if cohabitation is even possible, let alone harmonious.

Though, Will supposes, if they ever fight, he could just get on Red and go running.

"I'd want to move Red up there," he says, as the thought strikes him.

Hannibal smiles, so wide and happy. "Is that a 'Yes', then?" he asks.

Will smiles, and says, teasing; "Well, you did buy him for me even though we both pretend you didn't. Where I go, he goes." He squeezes Hannibal's hand again. "Where you go, we go."

Hannibal lets out a soft, happy sound, and lets go of Will's hand, favoring instead a tight grip in his hair, as he straightens and pulls Will into a deep kiss.

Since they are only taking Red, and now have a much larger selection of trailers to choose from, they load a single-horse trailer to the big black truck Francis drove last time, and Beverly rides with Hannibal as Will rides with Francis, back through the long drive that will take them to the event center.

Will breathes out, flicking the tab of his Sprite can that sits between his knees, taken from Francis' secret stash. "Any advice for a first-time showman?" he asks. Hannibal may have wanted Will to favor his own intuition and Hannibal's instruction when it came to training Red, but Hannibal hasn't been in a show for many years, and Will doesn't believe for a second he was ever nervous. Francis, though, still does events.

Francis hums, wetting his lower lip, and scratches at his jaw. He shaved this morning, and clearly he's used to having a bit of stubble. Will smiles to himself, thinking he likely did that

for Reba, so that his face was nicer to touch and less prickly. Apparently having a peacocking instinct is paramount when associating with Hannibal Lecter.

Even Will has suffered some of the aftereffects. Hannibal bought him a new outfit to show in, and it hangs in the back of Hannibal's car. The jacket is velveteen, soft to the touch, lined with silk on the inside to help keep him cool. The shirt is light and the cleanest white Will has ever seen, so much that he hadn't dared touch it lest his fingers smear the spotless fabric. The riding pants, black, had felt closer to leather than fabric, as buttery-soft as his boots. Will dared not ask the price, but he's sure it was a pretty penny.

"I know it's going to sound stupid, and you won't believe me until it happens, but you won't even notice the crowd once you're in there," Francis finally says, snapping Will out of his reverie. "The first time I jumped I damn near fell off the horse, I was so tense." That doesn't make Will feel any better. "But she was also a first-timer and didn't like jumping as much as Red does."

Will smiles, despite himself, and takes a drink. "I'm not worried about him," he replies quietly. Red might have enough confidence for the both of them.

"Not that I'm saying it's not going to be difficult, but puissance and showjumping are very different," Francis tells him. "You're not timed, there's fewer jumps to worry about. If you're confident you can make the big one that's more than half the battle." And Will is – Red is a giant, but not only that, he's fearless, and he loves jumping. Will thinks he could point him at a Goddamn castle and the big oaf would try and clear that wall just as much as any other.

He sighs.

"I know it's a lot of pressure," Francis murmurs. "But you can't let it get to you. Just go out and have fun – that's honestly the best advice I can give. If you're enjoying yourself, the horse can sense that. If you're afraid, they can sense that too." He's quiet for a moment, letting that sink in, before he adds; "Hannibal will be proud of you no matter what."

Will flushes deeply, looking down at his hands, smiling despite himself.

"Yeah," he rasps, clearing his throat. "I think so, too."

It's only a one-day event, so there's very little time between unloading Red and Will having to tack him up and get him ready for the show. He binds Red's tail to keep it out of the way, brushes his mane to a fine sheen, wraps his forelegs with soft leather protectors in case he knocks himself on a jump, all under Hannibal's watchful eye. Francis found Reba, and they and Beverly have gone ahead to save Hannibal a seat – in the front row, or so Beverly promised with a grin and wink in Will's direction. Nervous as he is, he didn't even have the heart to scold her for it.

When Red is ready, Hannibal steps into his stall with Will's riding jacket, and helps him into it, smoothing it down his shoulders and brushing off imaginary pieces of lint and straw. Will breathes out, his hands shaking and flexing nervously by his sides.

"I might actually throw up," he says quietly, regretting the sugary drinks and snacks he'd had on the drive over.

Hannibal smiles at him, his eyes soft with sympathy. He cups Will's face and kisses him, brushing his hands through Will's hair and petting down his neck and shoulders. "Come with me," he murmurs, and takes Will's hand, and they leave Red in his locked stall and walk towards the trailer, parked and left on the green. He opens the back and leads Will inside, closing it behind them, and Will blinks in the darkness, until Hannibal opens the shutter that allows air and light, and he can see the soft, muted grey outline of the other man. "Come here," Hannibal says again, and his voice is so soft and low, soothing, like he's trying to hypnotize. It might work, or maybe Will is just eager to think about anything other than the competition. He lets Hannibal draw him closer, shivers when their lips meet again.

"I know I've said it before," he whispers, "but I am so supremely proud of you – of both of you – and I know that you will do wonderfully today."

Will bites his lower lip. He doesn't want to talk, so he remains silent, letting Hannibal cup his shoulders, fingers kneading gently at them, before his hands slides down, smoothing Will's jacket tight to his back, careful not to cause wrinkles.

Hannibal kisses him again, and gently guides Will to the wall of the trailer, pushing him tight and holding him fast. Will gasps, stifling a soft moan against Hannibal's mouth as he's kissed again, and Hannibal's hand drops to between his legs, brushing over his hardening cock.

"We don't have time -."

Hannibal laughs, and shushes him, gripping his hair and tugging until Will falls silent. "We have as much time as you need," he replies, and Will knows that’s not true, but he is pretty far down the list as a late entry to the competition, and the first rider isn't due to start for another half hour.

Hannibal lets out a quiet, low noise, and puts his teeth to Will's ear. "Turn around, darling."

Will goes, helpless but to obey, and moans against his fist as Hannibal tugs his riding pants down, just far enough to free his cock and bare his ass. They haven't had time or energy to do anything since the night in Hannibal's study, and Will is sure the only reason he hasn't been going crazy has been the sheer amount of work he's had to do instead. He's been putting all his focus and energy into training Red, but now, with Hannibal touching him, the days apart come screaming back into focus, and he's suddenly so hard and aching that it hits him like a punch in the gut.

"Hannibal," he breathes, and closes his eyes as Hannibal kisses his shoulder and wraps a hand around his cock, stroking so terribly slowly, his fingers warm and dry. He holds Will by the hip with his free hand, making him arch backwards so he can feel that Hannibal is hard, too, grinding against his thigh.

"I believe you mentioned something about performing for me after I've been inside you," Hannibal purrs, and Will whimpers, clenching his eyes tightly shut. "Of knowing you're… what was the word you used? 'Dripping', I believe."

"*Fuck*," Will gasps. He presses his other hand flat to the wall and winces when the trailer creaks as they shift their weight.

"I'm not a man to break my promises, Will," Hannibal adds, and releases Will for just long enough that Will hears a rustle from his pocket, hears him tearing a packet open with his teeth, and then feels two slick fingers at his ass at the same time he sees a little white sachet of lubricant flutter, empty, to the floor. He wants to laugh and make a joke about 'positive thinking', but then Hannibal's fingers push in and Will has to bite his own hand, *hard*, to stop himself crying out. "Clear your mind. Listen to me, feel me. Don't think about anything else."

Will couldn't even if he tried. He might forget his own damn name before Hannibal gets inside him. The stretch is sharp, makes him ache and shiver, as he grits his teeth and worries the skin of the back of his hand between them.

Hannibal fingers push as deep into him as they can go, and curl down, until they brush along that sensitive place inside Will that makes him feel like he's breathing through molasses. He gasps, desperately flattening his palm to his mouth so he doesn't make a sound, and groans as Hannibal's fingers withdraw, he coats the excess on his cock, and grips Will's hips tight enough to bruise, holding him still as he lines himself up and pushes inside.

Will can't help the loud, wrecked noise he makes, and slams his free hand against the trailer wall as he tenses up, helpless in Hannibal's grip for anything but standing there and taking it. Hannibal laughs warmly against the back of his neck, finds the sensitive spot below his hairline and bites as he thrusts in as deep as he can. Will is sweating, the heat in the trailer overwhelming and *fuck*, he's going to *stink* of Hannibal by the end of this.

That thought warms him more than the heat ever could.

"Relax," Hannibal purrs, petting below his loose shirt, over his stomach. He flattens his hand as Will's gut tenses up, sinks in, he drops his free hand and starts stroking himself quickly. Hannibal doesn't go hard and fast like he did the first time, but moves against Will languidly, like they have all the time in the world. Maybe they do. Maybe Hannibal is the kind of man that even time slows down for.

"Oh, *fuck*," Will gasps, freeing his mouth and dragging his nails down the trailer wall hard enough to bend them back. "Fuck, Hannibal, please – please, move." Hannibal shivers behind him, his grip tightening, and he holds Will steady, pulling back and thrusting in with enough force that it feels like it rocks the whole damn trailer, though Will is sure it barely moves.

Hannibal snarls, biting down on the back of his neck, his hand sliding up to rest over Will's heart, curling into a fist. Will bows his head, giving his mouth more room, stifling his noises as best he can against his fist as Hannibal fucks him. It feels amazing, and he can't think about the competition, about his nerves, about all those eyes on him – there exists only this; him, and Hannibal, in the dark, moving together like they've been doing this all their lives.

Hannibal lets go of his heart, flattens his hand over Will's sweaty forehead and slides to his hair, gripping tightly, his other hand pushing Will's hand away from his cock and taking over the rhythm as his own thrusts start to get harder, fiercer. Will groans, staring blindly upwards, gasping as Hannibal's cock drags over his prostate, the heat in his chest building, swooping low.

"Will," he growls, "I can think of no greater pleasure than this; knowing you're mine, and showing you to the world."

Will shivers, clenching his jaw and swallowing back his low, needy sound. Hannibal's hand twists around the head of his cock, thumb slicking through the slit and gathering precum, smearing it down. He's going to stink, be sweaty and messy and anyone who knows what to look for will *know*. They'll all know, and Will doesn't give a fuck.

"Claim me, then," he growls, and reaches back to dig his nails into Hannibal's thigh. Hannibal stills with another low, rumbling noise, pressed tight to Will's back, his hand turning slow and tight around Will's cock. Will shivers. "That's it, Sir, *come on*. Fill me up."

Hannibal shudders, his hands flying to Will's hips to keep him still as he ruts against Will's ass, coming with a soft groan to Will's shoulder. He bites, and Will gasps at the feeling, blunted though his teeth are through Will's clothes. He closes his eyes, breathing heavily as Hannibal comes, content to wait for him to finish before taking over for himself.

But Hannibal surprises him, pulling out and shoving Will around so his back hits the wall, and then he sinks to his knees and swallows Will down. Will groans, tipping his head back until he can blink at the ceiling, fisting both hands in Hannibal's hair as he fucks forward, too desperate and close to be as polite as he normally would be.

Hannibal takes it with grace, gripping Will's thighs and encouraging him to thrust as deep and hard as he likes. It's too dark to see him properly, save the pale outline of his face, but Will knows his mouth will be bruised and tender by the end of it – Will might walk out of here looking thoroughly ravished but Hannibal isn't going to be nearly as well-groomed as he usually is either.

He grunts, curses out a soft warning, and Hannibal hums, swallowing as Will pulls back until only the head of his cock is in Hannibal's mouth, and comes with another low snarl, his thighs shaking and knees threatening to buckle. He'd probably collapse completely if Hannibal weren't still holding him up.

Hannibal swallows all of it, and parts from his softening cock with a gasp, wiping a hand over his mouth. Will hauls him upright and kisses him desperately, clinging and pawing at his clothes. Hannibal parts his lips, lets Will taste.

They have to part for air eventually, and fix their clothes, Hannibal brushing Will down again so he looks a little less like he was just thrown up against a wall.

Will clears his throat, flushing. "Sorry," he rasps, and Hannibal tilts his head. "You used a condom last time. I'm sure I'm clean but -."

Hannibal laughs, and shakes his head. "I may have also asked my friend to screen a sample for both of us, while he was assisting Bedelia. There's nothing to worry about." Will arches a brow.

"When the Hell-?" He stops, and tips his head back, laughing. "The chair?"

"Seemed as good a sample as any, though I will admit I received a thorough scolding for providing a non-sterile sample."

"Jesus." Will rubs his hands over his face, then up through his hair, trying to persuade it to behave itself, though he's sure it's a lost cause.

"Don't misunderstand me, Will, you're not the only one who finds a certain…enjoyment, in the idea of being claimed."

Will swallows, wets his lips, and pulls Hannibal into another kiss. "When I win, I'll make sure you get all the *enjoyment* out of the victory you can." Hannibal smiles at him, and kisses him again.

"There's that confidence," he purrs, and takes Will's hand, leading him to the trailer door. Will winces when he first tries to walk, very aware of the fact that, yes, there's a definitive dampness between his legs, and his thighs are still shaking, and his ass is sore. The sunlight seems too bright when Hannibal opens the door, though the breeze is refreshing after the sweltering humidity, and no one sees them sneaking out of the trailer and back towards the stalls.

Red greets Will with an impatient whinny, ears forward, quite literally champing at the bit. Will grins, and opens the stall, and Hannibal grips the far stirrup and keeps his saddle steady as he hauls himself into Red's saddle, wincing when his sore muscles protest their recent exercise rather sharply.

Hannibal grins at him, as proud and smug as he was the first morning they spent together, and takes Will's hand, kissing his knuckles.

"Ride well," he murmurs, and Will nods, gathering Red's reins and clicking his tongue so that Red tosses his head and walks out of the stall. Hannibal walks with them, for a while, and they part at the front entrance. There's a little trail leading around to the warmup ring, which has a few modest-looking jumps in it, and all the riders gathered. There are just over twenty in total.

He looks over his shoulder, to see Hannibal watching him. He lifts his hand in a wave, and smiles, and goes inside.

Will doesn't even know if this is nervousness. It feels more like the calm before the storm, as he rides Red into the ring. There are two jumps – one hogsback, which is a set of three poles

with the highest pole in the middle, and then the wall. The hogsback will remain the same height, and the wall will increase with each round.

He can't knock it, and he can't hit it at all – either jump – or he'll be disqualified. He can tell immediately that the wall is lower than what he's trained Red on, and even as he leads Red up to it, letting him eye its height, Red tosses his head and rolls his eyes, like he's scoffing at the height. Will grins, and kicks him into a canter, leading him around the ring.

Francis was right – he doesn't pay attention to the stands. Doesn't look at the big projection of the live feed high on the television mounted on the wall. He doesn't care about any of them. He can feel Hannibal's eyes on him, but they don't make him nervous – rather, determined. It's hard to feel doubt about someone's affection for you when their gaze feels like the only thing in the world.

He lines Red up for the hogsback and lets him fly towards it. Red takes it easily, landing with a solid thud and a huff, and Will slows him, pleased to feel how Red responds more easily to him now; slows when Will wants him to, flies when Will lets him. He circles around to the wall and slows him down, almost cantering in place.

Five strides. No maybe.

He digs his heels in, and the silence is deafening as Red runs for the jump. Four strides, three. Two, one – Red leaps, and clears the wall with a fierce kick of his hindlegs, tossing his head when he lands. He whinnies loudly, tail swishing, and Will smiles, patting his shoulder.

"I know, big guy. Easy, right?" Red snorts, and Will canters him out of the ring as the next rider comes in.

Five get eliminated in the first round, so there's seventeen left, including Will. They raise the wall another six inches, so it's seven feet tall. Again, he's cleared higher. Of the six riders that go before him, four clear it, and then it's his turn again. And again, Red sails over both jumps with ease.

None of the rest make it. Two of them knock the hogsback. Another seven knock the wall. The last one refuses to jump it completely.

Five left, including Will.

They raise the wall another six inches.

It's now the height Will practiced with. He knows Red is far from tired, so it'll become a question, now, of who he can outlast. The other four seem perfectly ready and raring to go as well. Will can admit, his knees and ass are a little sorer than he'd like – jumps that high promise a heavy fall, and he ruefully laughs at himself for being so eager beforehand.

But one thing's for certain; he's not nervous.

Will is the last one to ride. Of the four before him, one refuses, and one knocks the topmost part of the wall, but the other two clear the round. Will rides Red in and lets him eye the wall,

smiling when Red snorts and flicks his tail, ears forward. He pats the stallion's shoulder again and murmurs; "Just like home, big guy. Come on."

Red tosses his head, prancing a pace, and Will kicks him into a canter, leading him towards the hogsback again. Red clears it as easily as he did the previous times, and Will lines him up for the wall. Somehow it looks *smaller* in this giant, oversized arena, than the same height looked back home. He gathers his reins and rises in the saddle, and lets Red run.

Five strides, four, three…

Red turns the last two into one big one and launches himself over the jump. They clear it, but only barely, Will can tell by the soft gasp that echoes around the stands, followed by the applause. Red whinnies and kicks out, bucking halfheartedly, and Will huffs, sitting low in the saddle and bringing him in a tight circle, before he trots him out of the arena.

Red is sweating, now, and is starting to get tired, but so are the other two pairs. Will nods to them both and the leader, a woman astride a large sandy-colored mare, gives him a nod in reply. Will turns Red and lets him rest, watching as they lift the wall – not six inches, this time, but another three, so it's seven-foot-nine.

He blows out a breath. It's higher than he's ever tried to jump Red, and he's sure Red will try, but he's tired now, and it's not going to be as easy and familiar as it has been so far. Then again, Will's been doing plenty of new things over the last few weeks.

He strokes a hand up and down Red's neck, and blinks when he sees Hannibal appearing at the edge of the warmup ring. He walks Red over and Red puts his head over the fence, snorting gracelessly into Hannibal's offered hand.

"Never jumped that high before," he murmurs, and tries not to let his worry show. Though he's not certain it could be called worry, really. This is just another challenge, one he's eager to rise to.

Hannibal smiles at him. "Yes you have," he replies.

Will tilts his head, frowning, and Hannibal looks somewhat sheepish.

"I may have had Gideon raise the wall at home to eight feet, two days ago," he confesses. "I thought you had noticed, but chose not to say anything."

Will blinks at him. So the wall *did* look smaller. He rolls his eyes, huffing. "Any other secret confessions you want to admit to now before I go back in?" he teases.

Hannibal answers him with a conspiratorial grin. "Yes, in fact," he says, and pets over Red's cheek as the horse lips at his other hand. "Mischa and I are actually cannibalistic serial killers – we've been operating under the radar for decades, using our travels as horsemen and competitions to cover our tracks. I do hope that doesn't sour our relationship."

Will laughs, rolling his eyes, and nudges Hannibal's chest with his shoe. "You're not going to eat me, are you?"

"It's not my intention," Hannibal purrs in reply, his eyes raking over Will brazenly. "At least, not in the conventional sense."

Will shivers, blushing despite himself. "Stop it," he says – a halfhearted scold. The woman on the sandy mare has just entered the ring. "I have to go."

Hannibal smiles at him, and walks away quickly, wanting to be in his place when Will rides. The mare returns, and the second – a man on a skewbald mare – canters in after. The second rider refuses to jump the high wall, so he's eliminated. It's Will's turn again.

Even though he knows, now, that Hannibal raised the wall higher than this back home, he still makes sure Red gets a good look at it, waits until the stallion snorts and tosses his head in readiness, and leads him to the hogsback. He hops over it almost daintily, landing hard enough that Will winces, gritting his teeth at the ache in his thighs. He slows Red to a trot and lines him up to the wall and has to remind himself, again, that he's jumped higher than this.

He circles Red and adds an extra stride, for good measure. Six strides, turning to five – Red makes his fourth too long so Will has to bring him up for the third, then lets him go through the second, the first. Red leaps tall, mostly upwards, curling sharply around the top of the jump. Will waits, in a moment of complete weightless silence, and then Red lands with a heavy huff, and there's a round of applause that tells Will he cleared it.

He breathes out, and trots Red out of the ring, pausing when they get to the warmup area. He frowns, and walks Red in a slow circle, noting that his right foreleg seems to be moving slower, a little heavier than normal.

He stops Red and dismounts, going to his right foreleg and carefully smoothing his hand down the back of it. Red snorts, whickering softly, ears flattening when Will reaches his knee. It feels warm, and a little tender. Will cups the front of it and makes Red lift his leg, stretching it out in front of him, and almost earns a bite on his shoulder for his trouble.

"Easy, big guy," he murmurs affectionately. "I'm just doing my job."

"He okay?" The woman riding the sandy mare has led hers over, and is looking at them with concern.

"I'm not sure," Will replies honestly. He lets Red's leg fall and tenderly rubs at his knee, and Red doesn't try to bite him again, and his ears have gone forward. Maybe it was just a little sore, like when Will pops his shoulder and it tingles for a few seconds after. He takes Red's reins and walks him around, and he seems to be moving okay again.

"If you need to bow out, I can go let the officials know," the woman offers. She's not doing it out of menace, knowing Will's her only competition – he can tell she asks because she's concerned about Red just as Will is.

Will presses his lips together. He doesn't want to make Red keep jumping if he's going to hurt himself, but he doesn't want to be the boy who cried 'Wolf!' either. He leads Red around in another wide circle, and Red seems okay now, his head high and his ears forward, tail swishing impatiently.

"I think we're okay," he says, and leads Red over to the fence so he can use it to get back into the saddle. Even with his added weight, Red doesn't have any slowness or hesitation in his foreleg anymore. He gives the woman another concerned look, and she tilts her head, eyeing Red as he walks.

"He doesn't look stiff," she says in agreement, nodding. She looks back to the ring and bites her lower lip. "They're gonna take it to seven-eleven, now." She winces. "That's above the record."

Will nods. "It'd be nice to try breaking a record," he says, and she grins at him. "This your first time?"

"Second," she replies. "I'm usually a dressage kinda girl."

"This is my first anything, so I'm right there with you," Will says. He smiles at her. "I'm Will."

"Alana," she replies, and then straightens when she hears the announcer calling her name. "Alright, showtime! Good luck, Will!"

"You too," he says, and watches her trot away. He turns Red around, making absolutely certain that his leg is up to the challenge, and can honestly not find any fault – not when he walks, or trots, or the brief cantering circle he leads him around.

Alana emerges after a few moments, blowing out a breath. "She refused," she says, and rolls her eyes, grinning. "It's all you, rookie."

"Cool, I'll try not to make you look too bad," Will replies with a teasing smile. She grins back, and Will canters Red into the ring. He doesn't look at the wall, just wants to make sure Red's leg is going to hold up. He leads him around the wall, and Red whinnies sharply, pulling at his reins. "Alright, alright, you big brute. Let's do this."

He leads Red to the hogsback, and while Red sails over it, he stumbles on the landing, almost throwing Will off. Will pulls him up sharply, and brings him to a slow walk as Red blusters, nostrils flared wide, tossing his head. Will frowns, and looks up, searching out Hannibal in the crowd. He finds Hannibal immediately, and his eyes are on Red, on his foreleg, as Will knew they would be. He has a subtle crease between his brows, and he lifts his eyes.

Will raises a shoulder in a helpless shrug, as Red is impatiently pulling at the reins, kicking out as Will keeps not leading him in the direction of the wall. Hannibal's lips twitch in a smile, amused and proud, and he seems relaxed. He trusts Will's judgement.

Will has to trust Red's.

"Alright," he breathes, and turns away to line Red up. "If you break your Goddamn leg I'm never letting you hear the end of it." Red rears up a little, prancing in place, and Will grits his teeth, rises from the saddle, and lets him go.

Red doesn't clear the wall. He knocks the topmost piece of foam just enough for it to count as a disqualification, though it doesn't fall, and lands *hard* on both forelegs, his right one sinking down to compensate for the soreness, and he lists sharply to the right, recovering clumsily as Will leans back and tries to help keep his balance as best he can. Red lets out a loud, shrill neigh, and slows to a stop as soon as Will makes him, shaking his mane out with another heavy bluster.

Will dismounts, and walks him out of the ring, wincing when Red's right foreleg seems to drag, and his knee looks swollen. Not broken, thank God, but definitely in no condition to keep riding. He gets Red out to the warmup ring, not even caring that he didn't win. His focus is on Red, and making sure he's okay.

Beverly is there and has a cooling pack, and she helps Will take off Red's brace and wrap his knee in it. She gives Will an encouraging smile. "You did a good job."

Will nods. "He did," he replies. "Even if he's a big dummy."

Red rolls his eyes at him, and Will grins when he receives a nip at his hair for his trouble.

"That jump was seriously high though," Beverly murmurs.

"Does that count as a tie? I didn't really pay attention."

"Yep! You and the other rider split the purse because neither of you cleared it, but you were the finalists."

Speaking of the devil, Alana appears at Will's side, and kneels down beside him, offering another cooling pack and a jaw of something that smells rather sour. "I use this on Applesauce," she says with a smile. "My mare. It's really good for sore joints. He'll feel better in no time."

"Thank you," Will says, touched by the offer, and takes it from her, squeezing out a hearty amount and rubbing it over Red's knee, before he wraps the cooling pack over it again. "I'm sure he'll be fine – he's just stubborn and doesn't like to back down from a challenge."

"I think you two have that in common," she says with a wide smile, and stands. "You did a good job, rookie. I'll kick your ass in round two, next time." She gives them a wave, and walks away, gathering her mare's reins and leading her out of the ring.

Hannibal comes into view, and rushes over to Will as Will pushes himself to his feet. "Are you alright?" he murmurs.

"I'm fine," Will says, and shakes his head with a sigh. "I should learn to tell Red 'No'."

In answer, Red snorts and bends his head to graze.

Hannibal smiles, looking relieved, and gently brushes Will's hair back from his face. "We knew his forelegs needed to be strengthened," he says, and Will nods. "This was a possible, if

unfortunate, outcome. Once he recovers, we can resume the course. I'm sure he'll be back to fighting with you in no time."

Will smiles, and nods.

"In his defense, he's never jumped that high."

Will blinks at him. "You told me…" He trails off at the glint in Hannibal's eye. "You absolute *fucker*."

Beverly claps both hands over her mouth to, unsuccessfully, hide her laughter.

"I wanted to put your mind at ease," Hannibal says, smiling, unrepentant.

"I don't know whether I want to punch you or kiss you."

"Make love, not war!" Beverly yells.

Will rolls his eyes, but does, eventually, decide on a kiss, and he pulls Hannibal to him and does just that.

Inevitably, Bedelia does decide to sell, and Hannibal is the first person she comes to. She looks a million times better, much less pale and much more alert, and when they sign over the lease, it's put into Hannibal's, Mischa's, and Will's name.

"Best of luck to you," Bedelia murmurs, pocketing her copy of the contract. Her pale eyes alight on Will, and seem much warmer than they were before. He doesn't know if Hannibal told her about his involvement in her getting help, and he doesn't ask. She even smiles at him. "To both of you."

"Thank you," Will replies with a nod, and she parts from them with a cheek kiss and a fond farewell. The keys are sitting on Hannibal's desk, and he grins at Hannibal, and swipes them, tossing them from one hand to the other. "Should we go check out the new place?"

Hannibal smiles, and shakes his head, pulling Will to him. "I believe you made your own promise about what would happen after you won," he says.

"Technically, I didn't win."

"Are you truly going to argue semantics with me?"

"Oh, I promise."

"You're terrible," Hannibal complains with a theatrical sigh, that makes Will roll his eyes and silence him with a kiss.

When they drive up to Bedelia's stables – theirs, now, Will should really think of it as theirs – he's surprised to see a familiar face there when they park, waiting to greet them.

"Alana?" he asks, surprised, and she grins at him.

"Ah, Missus Verger," Hannibal says fondly, kissing her hand. Of course he already knows who Alana is, though Will blinks at the title, and the wedding ring now sitting on her finger, which she hadn't been wearing for the competition. "I was so sorry not to have had the chance to greet you at the competition. You performed admirably."

"So did Will," Alana says with a smile. "Margot has a few more horses she insists you train, and since you're moving up here, you're much closer to home. If you're amenable."

"Of course, you know I'm always at your disposal."

"Excellent!" Alana says. "I'll go give Margot the happy news. Bright and early tomorrow, gentlemen! I'll see you!" She gives Will a one-armed hug, and then Hannibal, and walks back towards her car. Will watches her go.

"God forbid she and Beverly ever become friends," he mutters.

Hannibal laughs, and takes his hand. "Perish the thought," he agrees, and Will grins at him. "Well, you've already seen the stables, but the inside of the main house remains a mystery to us both." He cups Will's cheek, and brushes his hair back from his face. "Shall we?"

Will smiles, and squeezes his hand, gesturing to the door. "After you."

Chapter End Notes

a few notes:
I would personally never keep jumping a horse if I thought they were injured, but this is fanfiction and I do what I want.
Also I was yelling at Hannibal for his timing like GODDAMN BOY WILL IS ABOUT TO RIDE A HORSE DO NOT. But of course they do what THEY want.

I hope you all liked it! Thanks for indulging me on my happy fluffy nerd horse boys.
See you in the next fic! <3

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!